



# The Pornography of Despair:<sup>1</sup> Lust, Desire and the Music of Matt Johnson<sup>2</sup>

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**Abstract** This paper is about intense emotions -- lust, desire, pain, longing, passion, anger, frustration – as they are expressed in the alternative rock music of Matt Johnson and contrived in our listening experiences. The “soundscapes” Johnson creates with the various musicians who comprise his band *The The* are at times ironic, at times contradictory and as often as not darkly situated on the underbelly of seeming human frailties. With this paper, we draw on Johnson’s work and art to articulate themes of male heterosexual desire and lust, and their relations to aspects of identity. We argue that Johnson uses lust and desire to particular effect, creating an “emotional geography” from which potentially liberatory social relations may emerge. We argue that Johnson’s work is a plea to place male emotions more centrally in our ways of knowing the world. Much of Johnson’s inspiration derives from a quirky understanding of the impact of global forces on the lives of individuals. It also offers a different way of knowing masculinity, one that embraces realities such as promiscuity and prostitution without judgement, treating them simultaneously as material, emotional and spatial. This differs from a rather narrow but

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<sup>1</sup> The title of this paper is from Matt Johnson’s unreleased 1983 album. Unhappy with the recording, he consigned it to the vaults of Epic/Sony, where it remains at the time of writing.

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nonetheless monolithic view of promiscuity as deviant and sick, and prostitution as an inevitable outcome of unequal divisions of power predicated upon dangerous aspects of male sexuality. Johnson's work mediates psychoanalytic theories of desire spatially, suggesting an energy and a place out of which social activism emerges.

The force of life is rushing through our veins  
In and out like the tide, it comes in waves  
The drops of semen and the clots of blood  
Which may, one day, become like us  
With outstretched hands reaching beyond love  
And up to something above ...

Take me beyond love  
Up to something above  
Upon this bed, between these sheets  
Take me to a happiness beyond human reach  
Beyond the grasp of lust  
Beyond the need for trust  
Beyond the gaze of the sick and the lame  
Beyond the stench of human pain  
(“Beyond Love,” *Mind Bomb*, 1989)

[The The\Mind Bomb\Beyond Love.mp3](#)



Image 1: Matt Johnson ©Sony/AVI

This paper is about intense emotions — lust, desire, pain, longing, passion, anger, frustration — as they are expressed in the music of Matt Johnson and contrived in our listening experiences. The “soundscapes” Johnson creates with the various musicians who comprise his band *The The* are at times ironic, at times contradictory and as often as not darkly situated on the underbelly of seeming human frailties. Johnson's career as a critically acclaimed songwriter has spanned more than twenty years, from the beginning of the punk rock period and into the new century. His work is biographical and intensely emotional, drawing on and integrating themes of lust, desire and spirituality with religion, consumerism and globalization. Words and music are fused in contradictory ways; at times effectively pairing up-beat rhythms and melodies with lyrics that elaborate despair and loneliness. With this paper, we draw on Johnson's work and art to articulate themes of male heterosexual desire and lust, and their relations to aspects of identity. We argue that Johnson uses lust and desire to particular effect, creating an “emotional geography” from which potentially liberatory social relations may emerge (cf. Anderson and Smith 2001). Johnson contrives a space within which deeply felt emotions resonate with social relations. By elaborating relations between the personal and the social, he raises in interesting ways aspects of lust, loneliness and despair that are rarely aired critically.

Geography's recent focus on identity politics too often conflates male heterosexual lust with patriarchal domination. This patriarchy is a form of social relations predicated upon male dominance and is often associated with men's lust and desire. In this formulation, lust and desire are aligned with the power of men over women. We argue that Johnson's work destabilizes this myth by highlighting that the strength of those emotions enables the forging of new social relations based on a passion and intimacy that respects bodies and their boundaries. With an honest appraisal of these shadow emotions,

Johnson engages more liberatory forms of sexuality. His sexualized social relations are *queer* in the sense that they dispel normative myths of male heterosexual power and violence. By refusing to subscribe to softer, seemingly feminized forms of masculinity but nonetheless acknowledging the pain and loneliness that often accrue to social relations dependent upon physical intimacy, Johnson forcefully pinpoints the power and importance of emotional struggle.

Johnson's work is not an essentialized male struggle for emotional recognition that counters feminist sensibilities. It is, rather, an attempt to place male emotions more centrally in our ways of knowing the world and to acknowledge the importance of lust and desire. Johnson's work may be considered liberatory because it offers a different way of knowing masculinity, one that embraces realities such as promiscuity and prostitution without judgment, treating them simultaneously as material, emotional and spatial. This differs from a rather narrow but none the less monolithic view suggesting that promiscuity is deviant and sick, and that prostitution is an inevitable outcome of unequal divisions of power predicated upon dangerous aspects of male sexuality. We are further struck by the way Johnson's work mediates psychoanalytic theories of desire spatially, suggesting an energy and a place out of which social activism may emerge. This social activism is global in perspective and contains an emotional plea that men (and women) no longer deny addictions over power, sex and material goods and, instead, recognizes the potency of lust and desire. Removed from the shadows, these emotions highlight humanness and caring.

Our study differs from other geographic perspectives on popular music that focus on a genre of music or, more commonly, place-based music. Examples of these geographic works are Ford's (1971) treatment of American Rock 'n Roll as diffusion, Gill's (1993) use of structuration theory to analyze music from the Pacific Northwest, Kong's (1996) focus on local Singaporean music, and Ingham et al's (1999) description of warehouse parties to elaborate a sense of Blackburn. We focus on one musician who tends to offset place-based consciousness for a more global rendering.<sup>3</sup> We are aware that



Image 2: Desire and Urban Space  
(Cover of *Dusk*, 1993) ©Sony/AVI

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<sup>3</sup>Although Johnson's work is usually not place-specific, his *MindBomb* (1989) project focused specifically on Thatcher's England with songs that articulated what he called "The Beat(en) Generation." He saw London in particular as "corrosive to optimism" (*LA Times*, March

what we are writing about here smacks of auteurism, an analytic framework used extensively in film studies to highlight prominent male directors. Johnson is the sole lyric writer and, with few exceptions, composes all his music. He either produces or co-produces his albums and, on occasion, plays all the instruments. Johnson is, in effect, the 'director' of his work. Sharon Smith (1972, 21) calls auteur theory "the most incredible of all male fantasies" because it celebrates certain (usually male) directors for their complexity and irony or for rising above their material. We are more convinced by feminist film critic Claire Johnston's (1973, 26) admonition that the test of any theory should be the degree to which it produces new knowledge and auteur theory has certainly achieved this to the extent that it is able to delineate the unconscious structure of film. What we learn from auteurism and what we try to articulate in this essay is not about Johnson's creativity and intentionality. Rather it is through the force of his preoccupation with lust and desire that important unconscious and unintended meanings are rendered. In this regard, we find Gill Valentine's (1995) discussion on how kd lang's music is consumed by lesbian audiences to facilitate the production of queer space particularly instructive because it focuses on the creation of identity and resistance. Valentine's insights help us move more broadly to a consideration of lust, desire and masculine identities.

The electronic medium offered by this journal enables an in-depth discussion of not only interview materials and Johnson's lyrics, but also his music. We quote lyrics extensively below and accompany the excerpts with .mp3 sound-bites. This is an improvement on hard copy publications that are often constrained to discussions of the lyrical content of songs. Although the lyrics may stand alone as text, they elaborate, or are elaborated by, music.

In what follows, we begin with a review of critical geography's focus on sexualities, bodies and music. We then focus on male heterosexual desire and the complex relations between minds, bodies and spirits, weaving Johnson's work through several themes that join the geographic and psycho-analytic literature. We then discuss the ways Johnson conflates corporeality, desire and action, and suggest how societal change may emanate from deep emotions. Next, we focus on the representation of space, place and scale in Johnson's work. This is followed by a section entitled "sound politics," that elaborates Johnson's musical style in terms of its connections and contradictions.

### **Engaging Spaces of Male Heterosexual Sex and Music**

Three strands of thought in critical geography propel our discussion of Johnson and his art. First, the past decade witnessed a prolific outpouring of work on sexualities, bodies and spaces, for the most part emanating from feminist and queer theory (Bell 1991; Knopp 1992; Bell and Valentine 1995). Through the 1990s, geographical work turned away from a concern with defining the space of gay and lesbian communities towards a fascination with sexualized identity politics, but to date there have been few studies of heterosexual desire. Bell and Valentine's (1995) famous anthology of studies that "mapped desire" contains only three chapters out of nineteen that focus on heterosexual identities, and these three chapters (McDowell, Woods, and Hart) are overwhelmingly concerned with patriarchal hegemony. There has been some considerable discussion of

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1993). Shortly after the completion of the album he moved to New York, to be in what he called in a somewhat ironic gesture "the belly of the beast" (interview with Garry Crossing, 2000)

masculinities of late and some of this discussion focuses on men's sexualities (Longhurst 2000), but again the overwhelming focus of research is on challenging heteronormativity and exorcising homophobia (Binnie and Valentine 2000).

These studies are important because they highlight the hidden assumptions of normativity that define aspects of heterosexuality, particularly those that bolster the myth of the nuclear family. There are, however, other aspects of male heterosexuality that are not normative, that are "queer," and consigned to the realms of deviance and promiscuity, the salubrious places of brothels and bordellos and red-light urban realms. If discussed at all, the parts of heterosexual desire that these places articulate are elaborated through shame; focus is on the exploitation and objectification of women's bodies, of male sexuality as a dangerous subversion of monogamy and the nuclear family norm. A large part of Johnson's work penetrates this underside of male heterosexual longing, embracing rather than eliding the contexts of desire. He searches behind and beyond lust and honors sexual energy as a potent ally against larger forces social oppression. In many of his songs, Johnson exposes parts of himself about which he is deeply troubled but none the less embraces as part of an important larger emotional struggle.

The emergence of the importance of interior and emotional geographies provides a second set of ideas in critical geography from which we draw. Although an artist as controversial as Johnson generates questions about male sexuality and body bits, it is reasonable to argue that the images he evokes also need some consideration from the perspective of recent psychoanalytic and therapeutic geographies (Pile 1996; Bondi 1999). Of late, geographers have used psychoanalytic theory and psychotherapeutic practice to help analyze and understand the society-self relationships that, we will argue, are fundamental to Johnson and his art. There is some criticism that this focus on interiority detracts from enduring (larger, exterior) political and economic problems (Hamnett 1999; Martin 2001). Of particular note, however, for what we are trying to do here, is Steve Pile's (1996) defense of psychoanalysis' ability to highlight the "politics of the subject" and Larry Knopp's (1992, 1995, 1998) attempts to examine the role of sexualities within the spatial dynamics of capitalism and globalization. The importance of bodies, emotions and sexualities to larger social struggles suggests a politics of scale that is beginning to be elaborated in the geographic literature (cf. Smith 1992; Lukinbeal and Aitken 1998). We argue that Johnson articulates important connections between his emotions — particularly lust and desire — and spatial/scalar constructions of capitalism.

Kay Anderson and Sue Smith (2001, 7) claim that the neglect of emotions in social science research suppresses "a key set of relations through which lives are lived and societies made." Johnson uses song-writing to resonate with listeners in a way that propels not only a sense of inner awareness but also, simultaneously, a call to social awareness and activism. Minelle Mahtani and Scott Salmon (2000) note the importance of popular music in the production of place-based identity, but they fail to elaborate the visceral connections between music and political identity. Emotions are highly political and sexualized but they are rarely enframed and emblazoned by academics as an important component of public action and responsibility. Johnson does quite well in this regard because he is a social activist and, like other artists, his professional life is about evoking emotion. But the link to desire and lust is important because it is with his exploration of the so-called underbelly of normative morality that energy for larger societal change emerges. Johnson evokes forms of lust and desire that generate a potent energy that can be used to propel positive social change. To paraphrase Anderson and Smith (2001), there

are times and places where lives are explicitly lived through pain, love, shame, passion, anger, and so forth to the extent that it is hard to discount the ways emotional relations dictate social practices.

This brings us to the third strand in critical geography that informs our work – “sound politics” or the emergence of an understanding of music as the product of material struggles. At one level, music is popularized through political struggles over whose music shall prevail. The last few years witnessed an expanding literature by critical geographers exploring music as it intersects with performance, place, nation, gender, identity and so forth (cf. Valentine 1995; Leyshon et al. 1998; Ingham et al 1999; Gibson 1999; Smith 2000; Revill 2000). Smith (2000, 617) argues that the most promising aspect of this work is not understanding music in relation to other things, but rather conceiving music as a medium through which social relations exist and change. It is not enough to specify the place of music in society but we must further understand, through music, the place of individuals and societies. We argue that Johnson’s work is illuminative because it provides a conduit for aspects of male heterosexual experiences that are rarely aired or understood publicly. This is not just about what his lyrics say (and they say a lot about male lust and desire), but about the physicality of his music and his call to action. As Smith (2000, 618) points out, music is better understood if it is embodied as physical power and performance:

My suggestion is that we can begin to achieve this [embracing of music’s physicality] by experiencing music as performance — a performance of power (enacted by music-makers and by listeners) that is creative; that brings spaces, peoples, places ‘into form’.

As heterosexual male listeners, we are part of the performative empowerment that Johnson’s work speaks/sounds to. As we struggle through this paper with the journey that Johnson’s work suggests, we move in a direction that engages rather than overcomes or discounts our own corporeal experiences. The questions we raise turn not only on grasping the importance of emotional responses to Johnson’s work, but figuring out what to do with them once we have them.

### **Embodying Male Heterosexual Desire**

Say it  
Say it  
Say it!  
(he can’t say it)  
He’s just an imperfect man  
Trapped in an imperfect body ...

He tried to be smart to catch out his own heart  
Cruel to be kind as he cut out all the soft parts  
 (“ShrunkenMan,” NakedSelf, 2000)

[The The\NakedSelf\ShrunkenMan.mp3](#)

We begin our discussion of Johnson’s work with the complex mix that articulates the relations between minds, bodies and spirits. Of late, bodies have become a part of the

social agenda of Western societies to the extent that Simonsen (2000, 7) argues that they are now recognized as a “cultural battlefield.” Simonsen (2000) notes that critical discussions in geography, and in most of the other social sciences, focus on embodiments and discourses about the body with very little attention paid to material bodies and their needs. Rather, priority is given to a deconstructive project that attempts to dismantle the Cartesian mind/body split or destabilize hegemonic notions of the body and dominant discourses on embodied identities. We use Johnson’s work to try to revision male sexuality in a form that is sensitive to patriarchal domination but is also less damning towards male heterosexual desire.

Invocations of the body in the geography literature are heavily shaped by the imaginaries of certain bodies — women, ethnic minorities, gay men and lesbians, and people with physical disabilities — rather than others (Longhurst 1995, 1997; Nast and Pile 1998; Callard 1998; Simonsen 2000). Men’s bodies and their desires are seldom incorporated in these reviews or in other social science discourses that tend towards disembodied explanations. Some feminists argue that men’s bodies are rarely questioned because they provide a norm against which all other bodies are judged. Alternatively, if considered at all by social science, the embodiment of men’s desire is hidden in a miasma of objectification and compartmentalization.

We recognize in Johnson’s evocation in the “ShrunkenMan” excerpt that begins this section -- with a soft acoustic guitar rhythm laid over a hard, driving discordant electric guitar, bass and drums – that the creation of quintessentially hard muscular male bodies also presupposes excising “the soft parts.” But nowhere in the corpus of Johnson’s work does he treat the material object “the body” as obvious and unproblematically contained outside of emotions. For Johnson, the body forms contradictory and complex associations with the mind and spirit. By suggesting this complexity, his work speaks to current academic attempts to transcend the Cartesian mind/body split and the ways it slips into other dualisms such as culture/nature, reason/emotion, public/private, man/woman, and so forth (Simonsen 2000).

Johnson evokes embodiment enthusiastically, and in contradictory ways. He does not deny bodily passions, but upsets their origins by sometimes focusing on the mind and sometimes the body. In the first excerpt below, a discordant harmonica sounding like panting gives way to drums driving a rock beat as Johnson sings about lust being contrived mentally and then lived. The second excerpt also suggests anticipation of a night of lust with a hint of predation, but a softer sound brings together Johnson’s desires and bodily reactions:

Here they come! The dogs of lust.  
 Out of my mind. Into my life.  
 (“Dogs of Lust,” *Dusk*, 1993)  
[The The\Dusk\Dogs Of Lust.mp3](#)

I got one eye open and one eye closed  
 & my thin body is trembling beneath the bedclothes  
 My heart’s beating against the roof of my mouth  
 -- It’s almost time to get out of this house.  
 (“The Mercy Beat,” *Infected*, 1986).  
[The The\Infected\The Mercy Beat.mp3](#)

In the song “PhantomWalls,” Johnson articulates his fears as disembodied and external to his self. In the excerpt below, the softest and most melodic of the three sound-bites here, a single rhythm guitar accompanies Johnson’s singing about fear:

Sensed but unheard  
 As the curtain softly stirs  
 It is not just a memory  
 But it lives and breathes  
 Watching over you while you sleep  
 Kneeling beside you when you weep  
 Heh, don’t be afraid  
 Don’t try to run away  
 Because pain can be your friend  
 (“PhantomWalls,” *NakedSelf*, 2000)  
[The The\NakedSelf\PhantomWalls.mp3](#)

At the very least, these three excerpts suggest that Johnson has no monolithic stance on the relations between mind and body and that he recognizes a complex set of relations wherein our desires and fears may become at times either embodied or disembodied. It is also important to note that when talking about lust, Johnson rarely portrays women as “the object of desire” or “the dark continent” of Freudian theory — it is from within himself that any darkness emanates.

Within the Cartesian body, sexual desire obfuscates rationality, undermining self-control. Desire and lust are emotions that possess qualities that may, if unleashed, draw men closer to the outer boundaries of masculine subjectivity, and may even entice them over the edge into the abyss of the *irreal*. We use the term *irreal* to suggest a non-normative risky form of subjectivity, a queer space defined by lust and desire, but not in terms of patriarchal domination and power. It is a space out of which lust and desire may be used to upset patriarchal norms. Johnson’s music suggests that embracing rather than suppressing lust and desire help clarify aspects of the self. It is out of the *irreal* that important aspects of the self emerges:

Before our juices run cold and our flesh grows old  
 Let me feed upon your breast and draw closer to your soul  
 Let me stay with you tonight and I’ll offer you my world  
 I’ll take you to the angels  
 If you take me to myself  
 (“Beyond Love,” *Mind Bomb*, 1993)  
[The The\Mind Bomb\Beyond Love2.mp3](#)

Getting in touch with the *irreal* relates to an important running critique throughout feminist literature: that bodies are not just flesh and blood or an object that the mind uses but are integral parts of selves. In important ways, the *irreal* puts men back in touch with their bodies.

## Body Bits and Bodily Fluids

In the geographical literature on bodies and boundaries, there is considerable discussion that focuses on bodily fluids (Image 3). Much of this is derived from the work of object-relations theorist Julia Kristeva (1982, 32) who argued that aversion to bodily excretions is a social construct which is meta-phorically and linguistically linked to symbolic aversions to the “other” embodied in racism and sexism (cf. Sibley 1995; Nast and Pile, 1998).<sup>4</sup>



Image 3: Body bits and bodily fluids, from the *Infected* (1987) video. ©Sony/AVI

Abjection (linked to but in many ways the opposite of desire), as defined by Kristeva, is derived from something we do not like but from which we cannot divorce ourselves. The abject does not respect bodily borders and definitions such as self and other - its apprehension of autonomy falters when faced with corporeal conduits between the external and the internal (e.g. mouth, anus, penis, urethra, vagina). It is the dissolution of socially constructed borders between the internal and the external (and between self and

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<sup>4</sup> “Object relations” is an awkward term adopted by psychoanalysis from the groundbreaking work of Melanie Klein. Her depiction of object relations is richer than those developed by Freud because other subjects are not converted into objects of desire (e.g. mothers) and the recalcitrant material of narcissistic drives.

other) that Johnson repeatedly enacts with his focus on bodily fluids as one possible fulcrum around which desire foments. In a song performed with Sinéad O'Connor, Johnson laments the loss of desire with the loss of fluids:

Our bed is empty. The fire is out.  
And all the love we've got to give has all spurted out.  
There's no more blood. And no more pain.  
In our kingdom of rain.

You think you know all about life. You think you know all about love  
But when you put your hands inside me.  
It doesn't even feel like I've been touched.  
And you were the boy I wanted to cry with.  
You were the boy I wanted to die with.

("Kingdom of Rain," *Mind Bomb*, 1989)

[The The\Mind Bomb\Kingdom of Rain.mp3](#)

The dissolution of corporeal boundaries is further suggested by the lyrics "... when you put your hands inside me/It doesn't even feel like I've been touched." The interweaving of minds, bodies, and bodily fluids is only one of the ways that Johnson fantasizes about the body's matter, countering the Cartesian prioritizing mind that emphasizes masculinity and rationality over bodies, irrationality, desires and lust. Johnson's work highlights the problem of separating emotions from bodies and recognizes that the inter-relations between these forces are complex.

### **Maturing Desires: Beyond Freud**

Johnson's focus on creating self from the *irreal* leads to questions about how much his work draws from normative Freudian perspectives on the unconscious and repressed sexual desire. In what sense, for example, does Johnson's notion of growing up simply represent overcoming the Oedipal crisis? Johnson's early work, in particular, does not always distance itself from Freud's biological explanation of desire. For example, the song "Delirious" from his first album, *Burning Blue Soul* (1981):

When spring comes around and the ice runs away  
And the sun hits the top of our heads  
Then the dormant desires explode into life  
And the body demands to be fed  
("Delirious," *Burning Blue Soul*, 1981)

[The The\Burning Blue Soul\Delirious.mp3](#)

It seems to us that even at this early stage of his career, Johnson's focus on desire and lust is not so much about normative biological explanations of sex, but the consideration of cycles of eroticism. Other songs suggest that it is also about tackling embodied social mores and accepting interior tensions. For example, the last track from his first commercially successful album, *Soul Mining* (1983), describes a "Perfect" day from which Johnson contemplates his situation. Set to *The The's* trademark up-beat pop rhythm that we'll talk about later in the paper, the song's narrative follows Johnson's

ruminations about self, bodies and death. At one point he passes a cemetery and thinks about “all the little hopes and dreams that lie lifeless and unfulfilled beneath the soil.” He sees an old man “fingering his perishing flesh.” Putting himself in the old man’s context, “he tells himself he was a good man and did good things, amused and confused by life’s little ironies he swallows his bottle of distilled damnation.” Bodies constantly change, but they are contextualized by authoritative discourses — in this case, a social construction of decay and addiction — about which Johnson attempts an exegesis that in some ways resembles a popular youth revolution, but in other ways opens up a much more serious consideration of the social construction of desire. In a song about his own aging, Johnson focuses on his jealousy “for youth’s first yearnings of lust”:

Yeah, it’s funny how as we grow old  
 We curse and point our finger at those ... those ... those ... THOSE  
 Who’ve made us scared and made us old  
 Who have touched our bodies and bruised our souls  
 Who have made us scared and made us old  
 It was those God! It was those  
 Who made us scared and made us old

Time to surrender ...  
 (“Jealous of Youth,” *Solitude*, 1994)  
[The The\Solitude\Jealous of Youth.mp3](#)

The point that we raise with these excerpts is that Johnson’s treatment of corporeality and lust seem affected by authoritative discourses on the cycles and rhythms of life and aging rather than a Freudian need to overcome repressed childhood desires.

In “Bluer than Midnight,” (*Dusk*, 1993) Johnson asks, “...where does lust come from, is it something to yield to or be overcome? I ask myself why love can never touch my heart like fear does?” Here he conflates lust simultaneously with fear and love, suggesting a complex and contradictory set of associations that go beyond Freud’s classic and singular “object of desire.” Unlike Freud, Johnson does not source desire as an innate instinct. He portrays desire much more diffusely than simply placing it upon a specific object of desire: it is at once a form of love, a cycle, an addiction, a door to fear, a sickness, an infection, a search for self and a form a redemption:

I can’t give you up till I’ve got more than enough  
 So infect me with your love  
 Nurse me into sickness, nurse me back to health  
 Endow me with the gifts of the man-made world

When desire becomes an illness instead of a joy  
 And guilt a necessity that’s gotta be destroyed ...

Will lies become truths in the face of fading youth,  
 from my scrotum to your womb,  
     your cradle to my tomb.  
 Nurse me into sickness, nurse me back to health

& tell me what it is –  
 That I want in this world!!!  
 (“Infected,” *Infected*, 1986  
[The The\Infected\Infected.mp3](#)

With *Infected*, Johnson is not suggesting that women’s bodies are repositories of lust and contagious disease, but rather that desires are man-made and fluid. If we agree with Jacques Lacan (1978), and we think in this case it is useful, then with desire we are trying to assert a sense of being, a way to mark our existence. Desire is conceptualized as energy, a positive source for new beginnings. As Johnson points out in *Infected*: “I’ve got too much energy to switch off my mind.” Desire, then, becomes a productive and creative voyage of discovery related to minds, bodies and souls. We argue that Johnson’s point with his *Infected* project is that the patriarchal basis of how we view desire problematically constrains it as an illness instead of a joy.

Men are taught to occupy space in ways that connote strength, potency and assertiveness. The male body is translated into an objective, physical project, subject to the motivation and will of its owner, a view that leads to the achievement-oriented, impervious, self-sufficient masculinity of commercial pornography. It is this body of desire and threat that Johnson eschews for a recognition of body, soul and desire as one: “But trapped inside my bones ...” (from “SoulCatcher,” *NakedSelf*, 2000). Johnson’s desire is not disembodied and enframed in strength and muscle, but it is rather unreliable and a somewhat strange physicality when constrained by authoritative discourses and salubrious contexts.

### **Lusty Places and Spiritual Spaces**

For Johnson, desire is not only embodied physically and connected intrinsically with the body — it is also placed. Musical images are joined on album covers and in videos with artistic images (mostly created by his brother), which travel through Johnson’s self-images to create the salubrious environments that elaborated his work (see Image 4).<sup>5</sup>

In “Diesel Breeze,” for example, Johnson’s train enters the city from some subterranean hole into a world of uncertainty, fear and coldness where the only recourse is to deny feelings of hopelessness and turn away from despair:

The train rises up out of the dark  
 Above the boarded up boulevards  
 And burnt out cars

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<sup>5</sup> In a 1993 interview, *Melody Maker* suggested that “*The The*’s visuals have always seemed every bit as important as the sounds.” Certainly, white doves impaled on bloody bayonets (the cover of *Mind Bomb*) are meant to evoke, but Johnson is concerned about MTV-style video interpretations of music. “That’s wrong,” he says in the interview, “and I’m aware of that. I think in the past I’ve relied too heavily on giving people visual interpretation of the songs rather than letting them make their own pictures up in their heads. I don’t want people to listen to the songs and automatically picture the videos. Obviously, you have to do the videos, but the ones I’ve done recently have been more geared towards straight performances. The songs can say so much more when they’re not tied to specific images.”

But save your sympathy  
Conceal your fear  
Pretend you got no feelings to feel  
Life is making a mouse of you  
The other window has a nicer view  
("DieselBreeze," *NakedSelf*, 2000)  
[The The\NakedSelf\DieselBreeze.mp3](#)



Image 4: Frame from the *Infected* (1987) video. ©Sony/AVI

Part of the appeal of Johnson's art and, it could be argued, of many negative representations of urban spaces, is their tendency to evoke contradictory feelings that always turn on the listeners ability to relate to those feelings and own their veracity. Many of his lyrics place the underside of lust and despair in quixotic parodies of urban angst and anomie.

Johnson's capriciousness arises out of honest appraisals of what he sees as the human condition, the existential consequences of male lust and desire, and a desire to turn responsibility inwards. "Out of the Blue (Into the Fire)" is about sex with a prostitute in an "unknown city." Johnson begins the song with "I'm a man without a soul," and it seems that he is maybe less present as a body. This counters Descartes' perspective that "the soul by which I am, is entirely distinct from the body (quoted in Leder, 1990, 126),

and resonates rather with Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987, 87) assertion that to be transformative images, words, stories and songs must fold back on the body and remake the soul:

Trying so hard to cleanse myself  
 I was turning into somebody else  
 I was trying so hard to please myself  
 I was turning into somebody else  
 I was trying so hard to be myself  
 I was turning into somebody else

Come my love with your desire  
 Out of the blue and into the fire!!!  
 ("Out of the Blue (Into the Fire)," *Infected*, 1986).

[The The\Infected\Out of the Blue \(and into the fire\).mp3](#)

In the video that accompanies this song, Johnson eventually finds himself in the dingy, ill-lit room of the prostitute, but at no point does he move to touch the woman in the room, who roughly and asexually bounces herself about the bed as Johnson stands in the doorway and sings:

She was lying on her back  
 — with her legs parted  
 Squealing like a stuffed pig —  
 I was going through the motions  
 — faking the emotions  
 And wriggling around like a lizard in a tin  
 ("Out of the Blue (Into the Fire)," *Infected*, 1986).

[The The\Infected\Out of the Blue2.mp3](#)

The anomie and desperation in this performance is disturbing because it is turned inwards, resonating with Jane Gallop's (1988) assertion that the mind/body split integral to the Cartesian model is an image of extraordinary violence. It is now widely recognized that subjectivity and corporeality are intimately entwined, but Johnson's angst registers another aspect of a crisis of masculinity caught in a singular nexus of repressed desires or, worse still, desire pressed into the service of an objective. The lyrics that accompany the images in the brothel are insidiously misogynistic and self-deprecating. By suggesting such, Johnson regresses the devaluation of bodies and lust to animalistic and mechanistic tropes. Therein lies his pornography of despair, which focuses on reducible objects and cutting away from bodies any kind of beauty, meaning or transcendence in desire. The crisis here is that men often view their bodies as instruments, but this is a violent disembodiment. Men's experiences of the body are often epitomized by feelings of alienation and absence, but the point of the song and the video is that Johnson cannot escape from himself. We argue that Johnson's work recognizes with Gallop (1988, 7) that men gain an inappropriate form of masculine identity through estrangement from their bodies. Importantly, this song (and the accompanying video) is not about the commodification of women's bodies and the objectification of desire but, we argue, Johnson's attempting to break out of a Cartesian confrontation. The prostitute's gyrations

in the “Out of the Blue (Into the Fire)” video looks more like religious flagellation than sensual foreplay, while Johnson’s body remains limp and demure. This brings us back, rather violently and problematically, to Anzaldúa’s (1987, 87) ruminations about the breaking of borders and the remaking of souls.

A large part of Johnson’s work is an exegesis of religion. Descartes inscribed on the body a modernist trope that structured corporeality as a mechanical substance reducible to itself. He expanded knowledge, step by step, to admit the existence of God (as the first cause) and the reality of the physical world, which he held to be mechanistic and entirely divorced from the mind. This is almost a complete dualism because it requires a separation of the material body from the inner self, and creates an ontological gulf that is bridgeable only by divine intervention. Alternatively, for Johnson, divine intervention is the spiritual power that indelibly binds bodies with minds, hearts with souls, desires with spaces. In an interview with Martin Roach (1994, 215), Johnson points out “I basically believe that human beings have a spirit — people confuse the mind and the brain. The brain is little more than a physical apparatus that basically operates the body, whilst the spirit operates the mind.” He goes on to outline a particularly negative experience with religion when his brother died. A local minister invited his family to church and proceeded to lambaste his mother with insensitive questions until she was in tears. Johnson notes that the *Mind Bomb* album was inspired by this kind of insensitivity from members of institutionalized religions, and “Beyond Love” was specifically for his brother. The song touchingly and poignantly elaborates Johnson’s feelings about the space of the body and its relations to desire and spirituality:

Move away from the window and into the light  
 There are some things in this life that you just can’t fight  
 It’s as if the spirits above have cast a little spell upon us  
 It’s as if heaven above is beckoning us  
 So let us take off our crosses and lay them in a tin  
 And let our weaknesses become virtue instead of sin  
 Our bodies stand naked as the day they were born  
 And tremble like animals before a coming storm  
 (“Beyond Love,” *Mind Bomb*, 1989)

[The The\Mind Bomb\Beyond Love3.mp3](#)

The *Mind Bomb* album was an overtly religious and spiritual statement. As Johnson points out in an interview:

On this album, I’m dealing with human spirituality and human yearning for God ... I’m taking a vast overview this time around. I’ve always been spiritual but now I’ve read a lot about religion, mysticism and cultism and it’s all starting to filter through. I would say that I’ve got more of a distance on some of those ideas now. But I still stand by a lot of it, especially the songs about institutionalized religion. Half the problem was that, if anything, *Mind Bomb* was ahead of its time. Since its release, a lot of the rap bands have started talking about the same kind of things. (Interview with Mather and Sheehan, 1993).



Image 5: Cover of a rare extended vinyl version of “Uncertain Smile”. ©Sony/AVI

The contrast between institutionalized religion and spirituality is evident on *Mind Bomb*, as Johnson struggles over desire, lust and love. On the one hand, “Armageddon Days Are Here (Again),” focuses on the relations between war and religion:

they’re five miles high as the crow flies,  
leaving vapor trails against a blood red sky  
moving in from the east,  
toward the west with balaclava helmets over their heads

but if you think Jesus Christ is coming  
honey, you've got another thing coming  
if he ever finds out who's hi-jacked his name  
he'll cut out his heart and turn in his grave

Islam is rising  
the Christians mobilizing  
the world is on its elbows and knees  
it's forgotten the message and worships the creeds  
("Armageddon Days Are Here Again," *Mind Bomb*, 1989)  
[The The\Mind Bomb\Armageddon Days Are Here \(Again\).mp3](#)

On "August and September," Johnson uses a slower cadence to elaborate familiar issues of desire, and then ends with a prayer:

And I pushed out my tongue for you to see.  
That I'd been dying of thirst for your company.  
Then you quenched my loneliness with your tears.  
And our clothes fell away, as we rolled back the years.  
But we couldn't deny it because we could not admit it.  
If our love was too strong to die  
We were just too weak to kill it  
Was our love was too strong to die?  
Or were we just to weak to kill it?

Every moment in that room, I closed my eyes in prayer  
Every moment I awoke, I clenched my teeth in prayer  
("August and September," *Mind Bomb*, 1989).  
[The The\Mind Bomb\August & September.mp3](#)

Although many critics disliked the unmelodic and bombastic nature of the record, acclaim was forthcoming for *Mind Bomb*, with a reviewer in *Time Magazine* heralding it as a revision of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in the sense that it created spaces within which desire is simultaneously fermented and dissolved. The wasteland that Johnson depicts in *Mindbomb* is conflated with symbols of war and themes that he articulates more fully in his *Infected* project. The relation between corporate global politics, addiction and desire is another wasteland theme that he introduces in *Infected* and then develops in *NakedSelf* (2000).

### Sound Politics

With *NakedSelf*, Johnson returns to some of the minimalist, hard-edged guitar sounds that he first pioneered in *Burning Blue Soul* (1981), an album produced in the rush of creativity that followed the cultural implosion of British punk. These two albums bookend nearly twenty years of work through which Johnson explores his sexuality and its relations to bodies and spaces. We've commented on Johnson's use of sound to help elaborate his lyrical themes, but up until now we've said less about how he creates specific

soundscapes. The balance of the papers looks more closely at the emotional spaces that Johnson's work opens.

In an early appeal to establish the "soundscapes" in "the cultural turn in human geography," Susan Smith (1994, 234) argues the critical importance of music as a neglected major art form that focuses primarily on non-textual sometimes inarticulate emotions. Johnson would agree, but is particularly sensitive to social and political practices that might underlie music:

That is the beauty of music really, the variety of emotions it provokes. I like music when I can feel the intensity involved, the feelings put into it. Maybe that's why I'm so harsh on the radio-friendly commercial stuff, which irritates me because it is so insincere. I realize that as a writer I could be more sensitive to the content of those songs, the motive of the music, which ultimately effects the way you respond to the song. Maybe it's just my snobbery and my aesthetics which can be a bit left field and peculiar (Johnson interview in Roach, 1994, 211)

Unlike other artists who spearhead alternative music forms, Johnson seems reticent to capitulate to market demands and the pressures of producing radio-accessible singles. For example, David Bowie's chameleon-like public persona flitted from fad to fad as he continually (and some would say effectively) renewed his art. The corpus of Johnson's work is less commercially accessible, but it is acutely biographical in the sense that it resonates with personal and emotional themes and with his social practices.

Johnson's experiments with music, words and images are less commercially viable than those of Bowie but we argue that they effectively represent the underbelly of a masculinist human global condition. "BoilingPoint," the first track on *NakedSelf* (2000), for example, begins with barely audible percussion followed by a siren that is mapped over a baby crying, and then a slow, grating, mechanical solo lead guitar that continues through the whole song in an eerie affirmation of urban anomie as Johnson sings about being in motion on a subway, feeling lonely and phony ([The\NakedSelf\BoilingPoint.mp3](#)). Again highlighting the metaphor of motion, "Diesel Breeze" on the same album uses two hard-edged guitar riffs and high-pitched feedback moving from one speaker to another to symbolize not only a train entering a lifeless city but also the lifeless context of the passengers ([The\The\NakedSelf\ DieselBreeze2.mp3](#)). *MindBomb*, with its focus on the hypocrisy of globalization and organized religion, begins with an Islamic call to prayer while, barely audible, a young child prays: "Satellite, oh, Satellite. Who sits upon our skies / How deep do you see when you look into our lives ([The\The\MindBomb\Good Morning Beautiful.mp3](#)). With these soundscapes, Johnson not only sets a stage for his lyrics but also creates a potent emotional space for the listener.

There is no doubt that Johnson is capable of writing harmonic pop tunes that work well as singles. In a *Melody Maker* article, Mather and Sheehan (1993) point out that *Soul Mining* continues to "sell by the lorryload" and "Uncertain Smile" is a timeless song that "has touched or will touch the lives of most discerning teenage pop consumers" who appreciate pithy lyrics, a good rhythm and wonderfully executed honky-tonk piano ([The\The\SoulMining\Uncertain Smile.mp3](#)). We argue that large parts of Johnson's appeal are the contradictions he evokes with dark, unwieldy lyrics mapped over bright, hook-laden melodies. Few songwriters could (or would even attempt to) cross a cheerful, upbeat rhythm with the chorus line: "I'm just a symptom of the moral decay / That is gnawing at

the heart of the Country” (“The Sinking Feeling,” *Soul Mining*, 1983) ([The The\SoulMining\TheSinkingFeeling.mp3](#)). In his only United Kingdom Top 40 single, bleak lyrical imagery is offset not only by the perky melody but also by Johnson’s pleasant, jocular delivery of “The beaten generation, the beaten generation / Reared on a diet of prejudice and mis-information” (“The Beat(en) Generation,” *Mind Bomb*, 1989) ([The The\MindBomb\The Beat\(en\) Generation.mp3](#)). It seems to us that Johnson fulfils the role of court-jester to the extent that he entertains and pulls his audience along on one hand while on the other he makes social comments that are a serious poke in the eye.

When dubbed as “gloomy,” “bleak,” “demonic,” or (in his own words) “a miserable bastard” by the popular music press, Johnson retorts:

This isn't bleak, this is cheerful. Isn't it a refreshing change from all this inane dance music? Surely there's room for someone with a point of view. I don't think it's bleak, I don't feel bleak as a person ... Contrary to what people think, I'm actually quite an optimistic person. You couldn't leave school at 15 with no qualifications and whatever, unless you had a certain self-confidence and optimism (Interview with Gary Crossing, 2000). But I don't want to appear to be negative, because I don't feel negative at all. It's a very exciting time to be alive, actually. There's tremendous opportunity. Nobody's quite sure where things are leading, and there could be some wonderful surprises around the corner (Interview with John Wirt, 2000).

Johnson claims a need to remain connected to the liberatory potential of darker emotions and personal politics. To abstract from these and write songs with feel-good lyrics is, for Johnson, to be seduced by the darker side of commercial song-writing and the normalizing power of the global music industry. In 1997, he recorded a series of experimental songs with American guitarist Eric Schermerhorn (famous for his work with Iggy Pop). The resulting “Gun Sluts” sessions were never mixed or produced into an album because Epic/Sony wanted Johnson to write accompanying commercial singles, which he refused to do. In the Crossing interview, he notes some of his problems with larger record labels:

What am I gonna do, put on a funny hat and play a turntable? I'm not gonna prostitute myself and I still have an audience I think, but I think it's changing. I think there's too much music. You remember ... you'd sit in your room listening to albums and they'd become these really potent, intense soundtracks to your life. Now advertisers, as soon as there is any kind of trend — for years it's been punk or rap or rave or mods and rockers — it's quickly absorbed and sold back. Any band now is happy to have songs in adverts. Personally I've always turned it down but it seems that everywhere you go you're being blasted by music and youth culture or whatever. So as a form [popular music] is exhausted, it exists purely as a form of commerce.

Johnson’s denigration of popular music reflects his current vendetta against the globalization of music and his concerns with power lying in the hands of a few large corporations. On *The The’s* official web site, he lambastes huge media mergers such as AOL/Time Warner and the mass takeover of radio stations by companies such as SFX/Clear Channel, which promote “homogenising the cultural landscape of this country [USA] to a shocking extent” (March, 2001) <http://www.thethe.com/toc.html>. In 1998,

Johnson's 17-year contract with Epic/Sony expired and he signed with longtime admirer Trent Reznor's (of Nine Inch Nails) Nothing Records to release *NakedSelf* (2000).

In an interview, Neil McCormick of the *Daily Telegraph* (February 10, 2000) notes that although Johnson can smoothly reel off facts and figures about the relative economic growth of America, Europe and Japan and the dangers of globalization, he is emphatic about his vocation: "I'm not an economist, I'm a song-writer." *NakedSelf* brings together nearly twenty years of Johnson's attempts to create a soundscape that reflects his proclivities as an activist who is concerned with the impact of global forces on individual lives. Johnson seems to be gaining a harder edge as his work matures. For the most part, the bleak lyrics on *NakedSelf* are echoed in the music: discordant guitars and frenetic rhythms create a disquieting sonic environment. As McCormick astutely notes, "It is a recording with a hard, aggressive surface through which his trademark melodies take a while to emerge." But the trademark melodies are there, although now they do not drive an album in search of commercial success. The soft, melodic "PhantomWalls," for example, continues the theme of personal change that Johnson initiated in *Dusk*. In this song, he embraces pain as an important emotion that enables change:

Hey, embrace your pain  
 You cannot run away  
 And pain can be your friend  
 As it explains

And all the while that you were waiting  
 For love to keep the light from waning  
 It's pain that stops the heart from hating  
 That cures the mind of hesitating  
 That helps the soul in separating  
 From everything that it's been blaming  
 Everything's changing  
 ("PhantomWalls," *NakedSelf*, 2000)

[The The\NakedSelf\PhantomWalls2.mp3](#)

The song journeys through therapeutic theory to transcend blame. The listener is encouraged to embrace pain and stop blaming. Ironically, "PhantomWalls" is followed by "Saltwater," another hard-edged primarily musical track that re-focuses on Johnson's enduring theme of bodily fluids:

Blinding his eyes  
 Rushing through his veins  
 Trickling down his thighs  
 Again  
 Saltwater/Saltwater/Saltwater  
 ("SaltWater," *NakedSelf*, 2000)

[The The\NakedSelf\SaltWater.mp3](#)

## Gun Sluts

An emphasis on emotionally heightened spaces through performed soundworlds can usefully illustrate the ways that social relations are mediated by feelings. We argue with this paper that Johnson creates a soundworld out of which different forms of masculinity emerge. In his work, Johnson considers the embodied and material places where desire resides and uncovers the emotions that rest fitfully with them. Lust, loneliness, despair and aging are some of the emotions that he pairs with desire and, when his work is viewed in total, it is clear that there are also important connections with contemporary consumerism and globalization.



Image 6: Matt Johnson from *Dusk* (1993). ©Sony/AVI

Johnson's music, lyrics and images are not theoretically coherent and they are certainly not an indictment of heteronormative behavior but, by hanging on the margins of normative behavior, they elaborate — or at least “travel through” (Brown 1999) — theories of desire. We argue that he portrays desire much more diffusely than simply

placing it upon a specific “object of desire” in the Freudian sense of the term: for Johnson, desire becomes simultaneously a sickness and redemption from despair. Johnson does not offer a patterned geography of lust and desire, but at the very least he points out where it takes place. His focus on heterosexual desire is of interest to critical geography because it illuminates the contradictory and complex contexts from which emotions elaborate social relations.

With this paper, we emphasize the unpredictable nature of songwriters and performers, such as Johnson, who do not always passively follow the dictates of commerce and consumers of their work whose listening practices are active. Our active listening of Johnson’s work elaborates forms of masculinity that eschew patriarchal models of power and dominance without soft-peddalling emotions that are deeply felt.

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### **Discography (Selected CDs and albums and selected 12"’s only)**

**For a complete discography of the entire THE THE catalog see:**

<http://www.thethe.com/sections/discography.html>

**(songs referenced in text are in BOLD)**

4AD CAD113 BURNING BLUE SOUL (by Matt Johnson) (8/81)

4AD CAD113 BURNING BLUE SOUL (new cover art) (9/83)

9 45266-2 BURNING BLUE SOUL (US CD re-release) (6/93)

This is the first CD release of BURNING BLUE SOUL with all new cover art and issued under "The The" instead of "Matt Johnson"

- 1 Red Cinders in the Sand
- 2 Song Without an Ending
- 3 Time Again for the Golden Sunset
- 4 Icing Up
- 5 Like a Sun Risin Thru My Garden
- 6 Out Of Control
- 7 Bugle Boy
- 8 Delirious** ©Sony/AVI
- 9 The River Flows East In Spring
- 10 Another Boy Drowning

Epic 25525 SOUL MINING (10/83)

- 1 I've Been Waiting For Tomorrow (All of My Life)
- 2 This Is the Day
- 3 The Sinking Feeling** ©Complete Music USA Inc
- 4 Uncertain Smile** ©Complete Music USA Inc
- 5 The Twilight Hour
- 6 Soul Mining
- 7 Giant

Epic 26770 INFECTED (11/86)

- 1 Infected** ©Complete Music USA Inc
- 2 Out of the Blue** ©Complete Music USA Inc
- 3 Heartland
- 4 Angels of Deception
- 5 Sweet Bird of Truth
- 6 Slow Train to Dawn
- 7 Twilight of a Champion
- 8 The Mercy Beat** ©Complete Music USA Inc

Epic 463319 MIND BOMB (5/89)

- 1 Good Morning Beautiful** ©Sony/AVI
- 2 Armageddon Days Are Here (again)** ©Sony/AVI
- 3 The Violence of Truth
- 4 Kingdom of Rain** ©Sony/AVI
- 5 The Beat(en) Generation** ©Sony/AVI
- 6 August & September ©Sony/AVI
- 7 Gravitate to Me
- 8 Beyond Love

Epic 53164 DUSK (2/93)

1 True Happiness This Way Lies

2 Love is Stronger Than Death

3 Dogs of Lust ©Sony/AVI

4 This Is the Night

5 Slow Emotion Replay

6 Helpline Operator

7 Sodium Light Baby

8 Lung Shadows

**9 Bluer Than Midnight** ©Sony/AVI

10 Lonely Planet.

SOLITUDE (US COMPILATION EP) (9/93)

includes SHADES OF BLUE EP, DIS-INFECTED EP,

The Violence of Truth (DNA remix), and Jealous of Youth ©Sony/AVI

Nothing 0694905102 NAKED SELF (2000)

**1 Boiling Point** ©Sony/AVI

**2 Shrunken Man** ©Sony/AVI

3 The Whisperers

**4 Soul Catcher** ©Sony/AVI

5 Global Eyes

6 December Sunlight

7 Swine Fever

**8 Diesel Breeze** ©Sony/AVI

9 Weather Belle

10 Voidy Numbness

**11 Phantom Walls** ©Sony/AVI

**12 SaltWater** ©Sony/AVI