

## Sex Panics, Sex Publics, Sex Memories

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### 1

“All profound changes in consciousness by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesia,” Benedict Anderson writes, explaining the rise of national identity from a deep historical and historiographical dialectic of memory and forgetting; “out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives.”<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I will focus on the formation of a subcultural or countercultural, rather than national or supercultural, identity. My premise will be that the last decade has witnessed a profound shift

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1. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983), 204.

in sexual subjectivity and that, as Anderson argues will occur with any deep shift in consciousness, the change has also involved a systematic operation of amnesia. In contrast to Anderson, however, I want to argue that narrative follows not in the wake of amnesia but precedes it. The last decade has witnessed a discursive operation that has instigated a cultural forgetting and, as Anderson argues must happen when popular memory is obliterated, the substitution of a newly official remembering that can reconstitute sanctioned identity out of historical violence. Like national identities, the sexual consciousness that emerges from such narratives of forgetting and (selective and reformulated) memory serves state interests. Cultural amnesia, in other words, is at the heart of what some are calling the current sex panic: the systematic assault on sexualities that diverge from the interests of the privatized and heteronormative reproductive family.

Sex panics are outgrowths of restrictive changes in cultural consciousness, of which the crackdowns on nonnormative sexual spaces by the police or by zoning boards are only late manifestations.<sup>2</sup> In particular, sex panics cannot take place without a systematic assault on memories that associate sex and subjectivity in ways that challenge normative regimes. Different acts of memory, I want to argue, generate and justify different sexual consciousnesses, which in turn shape divergent theories of the relationships sexual subjects—and here I am talking specifically about urban gay men—have to social protest and organization.

To demonstrate the connection between memory, sexual subjectivity, and activism, I want to offer two stories I received by email from gay men in response to lecture versions of this essay. The older of the two men writes:

I found myself experiencing quite a bit of “Seventies envy” lately—probably not an uncommon experience for gay men under 35 or 40. And it’s not really about the unlimited, worry-free, AIDS anxiety-free sex. It’s more about the kind of intimacy you can experience in public sex spaces. In fact, my first such experiences shocked me because I was so surprised how much better I was treated by gay men in those spaces as compared to other gay social spaces. Even re-

2. See, for example, Caleb Crain, “Pleasure Principles: Queer Theorists and Gay Journalists Wrestle over the Politics of Sex,” *Lingua Franca* 7, no. 8 (October 1997): 26–37; Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “Gay Culture Weighs Sense and Sexuality,” *New York Times*, 23 November 1997, sec. 4, p. 1; Urvashi Vaid, “Last Word: Panic or Panacea?” *Advocate*, no. 748 (9 December 1997): 88; and Michael Warner, “Media Gays: A New Stone Wall,” *Nation*, 14 July 1997, 15–19.

jection is kinder and gentler, and in group scenes, you end up having sex with men who you might not have sex with otherwise—men who are both more and less attractive than you are. Not to idealize it, but it struck me as a relatively democratic and inclusive space as compared to gay bars, for instance (which is not to say that hierarchies don't get enacted—the Unicorn would be much worse than the back room at the Ram, for instance). Anyway, when someone stuck poppers under my nose for the first time, I felt like I was actually transported back to the Seventies. I felt like I was feeling what “they” must have felt, our older (or dead) gay brothers (dare I use that term), some of whom were actually in the room, symbolizing the historical continuity that so often gets obscured by discourses of ageism. I felt like I had tapped into some eternal, carnal, homoerotic AND brotherly stream of consciousness. Essentialist and sentimental, yes. But I experienced a much greater sense of community than, for instance, I ever did in cliquey and self-righteous ACT UP and Queer Nation social circles. And guess what? I started going to demonstrations again (ones that benefit lesbians, too!).

The second man, probably ten years younger than the first, has a very different story to tell. His narrative begins with his graduation from high school in 1992, but he quickly (in the second sentence) urges me to “fast-forward” two years to his recognition in college of his newly formed identity as a member of Generation Q(ueer).

As a fairly representative member of the elite of “Generation Q” . . . I feel fairly safe in saying that activism, per se, is gasping for its final breath before falling into oblivion. The reasons are numerous and with a small amount of investigation obvious. For decades, centuries even, there was a prevailing feeling of fear and discomfort at the concept of being a gay individual in society. And it simply no longer is an issue for most people who are entering adulthood in the late 1990s. Growing up I, as well as numerous of my friends, [was] not confronted with the sort of oppressive antigay imagery that activism works so feverishly to eradicate. We don't feel oppressed, we don't feel limited, we don't WANT to feel the need to be a “united front”—rather what we see is a culture among gay young adults that is far, far more concerned with individual concerns and causes. This was a trend that began years ago, it would seem. However, in the 1980s what occurred was a regeneration of activist spirit to “fight

AIDS.” Well, it’s been years now—and the community understands it. And frankly, among many (though I do not speak for all) Generation Qers, there is a prevailing feeling that “no one has a body that’s good enough to die for.” Essentially, the sympathy is no longer there—if someone doesn’t practice safe sexual practices, then it is THEIR problem. And what we have is a condition in 1990s America that operates as laudanum for the activist spirit. And you know what? That’s not bad—in fact, it should be embraced. . . . It has come to the forefront of young gay intellectuals that by SEPARATING and SEGREGATING themselves from the rest of society they are in essence setting back the clock decades. I feel comfortable in speaking from the perspective of a young gay man who moves in circles of the relatively cosmopolitan. And as such, allow me to address the major difficulty for us in terms of activism, as evinced in the 1970s. It evokes images of the “whore culture.” Who would have thought that “gay college guys” and “monogamy” would be used in the same sentence without any negation? Activism had always focused far too much on “embracing” gay culture rather than improving it. . . . Some say that it is a matter of the abrupt and visible tendencies of the under-25 Queer culture to be considerably more conservative than the over-25. Rather, I see it as a subconscious rejection of what we are not comfortable with. . . . People had not been exposed to information that said “Yes, you can be gay and have civilized, happy, dating relationships that don’t involve casual sex with whatever guy you find attractive.” . . . It has finally occurred to Generation Q that [in order] to make any significant progress in our own lives (call it greedy, if you like) it’s time for gay men to stop thinking with their dicks (excuse the expression) and start thinking about the future. The buzzword, so to speak, of Generation Q has been POST GAY. Although rather amorphous in definition, it is essentially this feeling that “queeny protest” is out—and getting on with our lives as productive members of society is in. . . . Our energies are better spent elsewhere on the question of gay prosperity.

One could draw many conclusions from these two accounts, but I want to focus on the use both men make of memory in sorting out questions of sexual culture, identity, and activism. Both accounts are memory narratives that attempt to orient the reader by offering an experience from the past. Yet the second writer quickly expresses a desire (set in the im-

perative mode) to leave the past (“fast-forward . . .,” “start thinking about the future”). The first account, on the other hand, “fast-forwards” to consequences of memory only in its final sentences. Not surprisingly, given their different reactions to dwelling in the past, the two men arrive at different judgments of a previous generation of gay culture. While the first writer expresses a desire, a fondness, even an “envy” for the 1970s, the second views that same decade with distaste. Locating the 1970s as the ordinary site of “whore culture” and “queeny protest,” the second writer invokes a memory only to shape it as unhealthy, thereby distancing himself from the past, whereas the first account, full of envious longing, imagines a connection that is in part real (both generations join in the activities of the back room) and in part fantastic (what the writer calls “sentimental”). Also not surprisingly, given that the amnesia the second man works toward (he is writing against those who would “[set] back the clock”) is a gesture of distance, he ends up condemning collectivism: Now that “the sympathy” is gone, there is no longer any need for a “united front” (although in what might be a memory trace, he speaks repeatedly for an entire generation). The key terms in the second man’s understanding of progress are *comfort* and *prosperity*, which are best accomplished through monogamous coupling (dating, as opposed to “group scenes”) of proud and enterprising individuals (“individual concerns and causes”). The chief values expressed in the first account are quite different, relating to a democratic and inclusive intimacy that is both sexual and collective.

While I hesitate to present either man as representative of an entire generation (although each claims something like that for himself), together, their accounts are richly evocative, I would argue, of competing attitudes toward memory and collective action (whether of sex or protest or both) that lie behind recent sex panics and pro-sex activism in cities such as New York. My motive is not to assess which of the competing memories of the 1970s conjured by these men is empirically more accurate—that is, whether gay men in the 1970s actually experienced anything like sexual democracy or irresponsible abandon. Those questions I leave to better historians than I. Rather, my interest is in what the desire for memory or for amnesia allows each writer to inscribe in the *present* in relation to his consciousness as a gay man. For the first writer, memory allows him to generate—for himself if for no one else—a *communitas* that authorizes his work on behalf of social transformation. In contrast, I take the second writer’s assumptions—that activism has died and that advances in gay visibility and acceptance are real and permanent—as dangerous, not despite but *be-*

*cause* of the things the second writer sees as most characteristic of his generation. I admire the second man's dedication to safe sex (even if purchased through a kind of brutal every-man-for-himselfism) and his confident sense that "gay is good" (as long as it is *his* version of gay). Conversely, there are numerous ways to be critical of the attitudes expressed in the first account, as the writer himself suggests by repeatedly qualifying his Whitmanesque utopianism as a series of poststructuralist no-no's (essentialist *and* sentimental—what could be worse?). I want to argue, nevertheless, that the first account, with its faith in collectivism, social expansion, and sexual inventiveness, is far more desirable as a narrative of queer sexual culture and as an antidote to current restrictive attitudes and policies toward nonnormative sexual practices than is the vision expressed by the spokesman for a generation nominally more queer than its predecessors. For the values expressed in the second account (individual prosperity, private coupling, and intellectual comfort—all those things that get summed up by the writer as "civilization") are exactly the values endorsed by cultural conservatives during the long Reagan/Bush years and since.

What I ultimately want to suggest is that the dynamics of identity-formation may be taken up not to foster sexual conservatism but to resist heteronormativity through the constructions of counter-memories that urge not amnesia (as conservative narratives, I will argue, do) but a strategic (that is, purposeful rather than transparent) remembering. Key to that change from willed amnesia to purposeful memory is a shift in emotional registers from shame and guilt to desire and elation. As the historian John Demos notes, guilt is the touchstone in a disciplinary regime that seeks to make the values of the industrializing nation internalized as the freely chosen discipline of individual citizens.<sup>3</sup> We can see that sex panics rest on a pedagogical structure that uses guilt about a past—forgotten and then resurrected as dirty, selfish, and diseased—to instruct subjects in the "proper" values that, as Demos notes, are logically contradictory: on the one hand, the expansive opportunity promised by individualism, and, on the other, the regulatory self-control that the individual practices to prevent her- or himself from fully experiencing that potential. I do not want to suggest that the acts of counter-memory I am advocating are *not* invested in disciplinary pedagogies. They are. The struggle one sees in the first account

3. John Demos, "Oedipus and America: Historical Perspectives on the Reception of Psychoanalysis in the United States" (1978), in *Inventing the Psychological: Toward a Cultural History of Emotional Life in America*, ed. Joel Pfister and Nancy Schnog (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997): 63–78.

above, in which the writer seeks to place himself in a cultural setting where he feels he both does and does not belong, demonstrates that this account, too, is a parable of identity formation and the necessary self-alienations (the condition of “envy”) it produces. Yet given these two technologies of memory and identity, I still would argue that strategic countermemory is crucial to transformative activism in the queer future.

Before taking up the politics of conservative amnesia and queer countermemories, however, I want briefly to suggest a friendly amendment to other theoretical and activist responses to contemporary urban sex panics. Too frequently, these responses focus on panic as occurring spatially across cultures, leaving culture temporally static, rather than seeing the relationship of spatial to temporal crackdowns. The politics of memory, that is, are often subsumed by the politics of space: Who has access to public space, are sex and intimacy limited to monogamous domesticity and the privately owned home, what is the viability of public sex under the “quality of life” regime that has been established to “clean up” (rezone and redevelop) sex clubs, porn theaters, and porn retailers?

The activist focus on spatial politics has found a corollary in queer theory, which has taken up the issue of “queer space” with remarkable enthusiasm and sophistication, but often at the expense of queer memory. To take but one case in point: In their recent manifesto on queer “world making,” Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner use the word *space* as often as *queer* and *sex*, until the terms come to seem synonymous.<sup>4</sup> Berlant and Warner define heteronormativity as “a sanitized space of sentimental feeling” that in turn becomes “a space of pure citizenship” (SP, 549). “Intimate life,” for Berlant and Warner, “is the endlessly cited *elsewhere* of political public discourse, a promised haven that distracts citizens from the unequal conditions of their political and economic lives, consoles them for the damaged humanity of mass society, and shames them for any divergence between their lives and the intimate sphere that is alleged to be simple personhood” (SP, 553). It is the need to protect the phantasmagoric “zone of heterosexual privacy” (SP, 550) as the exclusive site of sexuality in America that results in the closing of sex clubs and public sex spaces, represented as diseased and infantile, in favor of the mature development of private real-estate interests in areas such as New York’s Times Square. To resist the development of the “protected spaces” of privatized intimacy that “straight

4. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (winter 1998): 547–66. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as SP.

people inhabit" (SP, 555) as the only locations of (a necessarily deferred) sexual culture and national belonging, Berlant and Warner privilege "queer zones and other worlds estranged from heterosexual culture" (SP, 547). Such "zones" challenge "the project of normalization that has made heterosexuality hegemonic . . . in the hierarchy of property and propriety" (SP, 548). In public sex sites—clubs, tearooms, parks, piers, porn theaters—those engaging nonnormative sexualities undertake the visionary project "to construct the architecture of queer space in a homophobic environment" (SP, 551).

In Berlant and Warner's essay, varieties of space—zones, havens, spheres, habitations, property, architecture—predominate, until the program for queer "world making" sounds eerily like the rhetoric of the real-estate development it challenges, moving seamlessly between the architectural and the utopian: "The queer world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies" (SP, 558).

There is, of course, much to be said for inhabiting the discourse one combats. By letting the language of real-estate development serve queer public intimacy, Berlant and Warner provide a powerful and necessary critique of heteronormative privacy and put forth a compelling defense of the social networks and queer culture created through public sex. At the same time, however, the essay threatens to divorce space from memory as linked technologies of communal intimacy in queer public culture. Berlant and Warner begin by acknowledging the importance of memory in resisting the "amnesia archive," which forces immigrants to forget the violences and disavowals that constitute middle-class, white American identity: "Does belief that normal life is actually possible *require* amnesia and the ludicrous stereotyping of a bottom-feeding culture apparently inadequate to intimacy?" (SP, 556). Yet the politics of memory are quickly subsumed by the presumed realpolitik of a spatialized panic, evidenced by actions such as the October 1995 New York City Zoning Test Amendment, the potential results of which Berlant and Warner report: "Of the estimated 177 adult businesses in the city, all but 28 may have to close under this law" (SP, 551).

The threat of space invasion, of the government cracking down on queer culture in the intimate space of porn theaters and tearooms, upholds the concept of a panic occasioned—even justified—by the policing of physical spaces of nonnormative sexuality. Activists, however, have often found themselves backed into a corner by the panic politics of space. When the claim that 61 percent more men were arrested for public sex in 1997 over



previous years was challenged, the statistics provided by New York's Anti-Violence Project—eighteen men were arrested in the first half of 1996, twenty-nine in the first half of 1997—hardly indicated a dramatic crackdown. Claims of widespread closure of bars and sex clubs have been similarly disputed by those who argue that many of the city's best-known establishments have remained open, while others were closed due to license infractions unrelated to recent rezoning initiatives.<sup>5</sup>

Despite this skepticism, activists have been unwilling to broaden the spatialized politics of panic, which serve important psychological and practical ends. Crackdowns make good spectacle; they are a dramatic tool for rallying and maintaining activist anger and action. Even more useful (although counterproductive to the critique of identity politics undertaken by many queer theorists), disputes over space create clear demarcations between the “outside” and the “inside,” “them” and “us.” The police and the city become clear enemies, giving a presumed coherence—and innocence—to the queer world under attack. The notion of a public as a space enables the asserted division between inside and outside, since it permits a purity of occupation that translates metaphorically (but not unproblematically) from physical to cultural space, to what Berlant and Warner refer to as the space of “sexual personhood.” In this sense, a “panic” functions for queer politics much as a “crisis” does for dominant ideology, ensuring the affective suturing of physical space (the nation) and private identity (citizens) in relation to a common enemy (communism, immigrants, sexual deviants).

Prosex activists are, of course, correct: Queer culture *is* under assault, the “normalization” of sexuality, hetero- and homo-, dramatically limiting the potential for resistance in communities that have traditionally presented the strongest challenge to heteronormative nationalism. In bringing the regulation of sex and intimacy to public debate, activist groups such as Sex Panic do queer culture an invaluable service. My point is simply this: By limiting the normalizing of sexuality to spatial politics, Sex Panic threatens to obscure the *cultural* politics where the affective work of normalization takes place, sutured to the practices of everyday life as much by narratives of memory as by physical intimacies. If the city, operating in the interests of heteronormativity, is panicked over the growth of queer sexual culture, so, too, are gays and lesbians—including many queers—panicked, not only by closures and arrests but by the increased normalization of sexual representation and the concomitant refashioning of intimate memory brought about

5. See Crain, “Pleasure Principles,” 26–37.

by years of right-wing politics and AIDS phobia, which are orchestrated to obliterate memory by re-creating the values of “the sexual revolution” as deadly and infantile, irresponsible and narcissistic, anything but revolutionary. Theorists of trauma have argued that assaultive violence may lead to a loss or displacement of memory, but it is also true that the loss of memory may constitute its own trauma.

## 2

Gay men have themselves contributed to the normalizing of sexual representation, as Sex Panic acknowledges in its analyses of neoconservative gay journalists such as Gabriel Rotello, Michelangelo Signorile, and Andrew Sullivan.<sup>6</sup> These men have been criticized for blaming AIDS on gay sexual culture and calling on the city to regulate the places where sex occurs.<sup>7</sup> Grievous as these invitations to state regulation are, they are part and parcel of a larger strategy to vilify queer memory; more than simply calling for a crackdown by the city, gay “neocons” enact a form of enforced amnesia, cutting off gay men from sexual memories that provide alternative models of public intimacy and political union. For example, in a segment of the National Public Radio (NPR) program *All Things Considered* (“Sex

6. Gabriel Rotello, Michelangelo Signorile, and Andrew Sullivan have been rewarded for their neoconservatism with unprecedented access to a print public: Rotello and Signorile have served as columnists for *New York Newsday* and the *New York Times*, respectively, while Sullivan served as editor of the *New Republic*. Other neoconservative columnists include Eddie James, winner of the 1997-1998 Randy Shilts Award for Outstanding Achievement, who began his column for the *Baltimore Alternative*, “Sex and Sensibility: Why Are Some Men Losing the Latex?” (February 1998), with this frankly counternostalgic linkage of memory and unsafe sex: “John Travolta, Boogie Nights, disco balls, bell-bottoms—everywhere you look the signs are painfully clear that the '70s are back. And among gay men, a small but growing number are not just embracing the pop cultural kitsch of the polyester era, they are also adopting its pre-AIDS, anything-goes mentality when it comes to sex.”

7. Michael Warner has argued that gay neoconservatives “repudiate the legacies of the gay movement—its democratic conception of activism, its goal of political mobilization, its resistance to the regulation of sex and its aspiration to a queer world.” This repudiation of the legacy of the 1970s legacy allows gay neocons to “promote a vision of the gay future as assimilation, and they willingly endorse state regulation of sex to that end. They are interested in sex only insofar as it lends itself to respectability and self-esteem; and forget unconscious desire, or the tension between pleasure and normalization, or the diversity of contacts through which queers have made a world for one another.” See “Media Gays: A New Stone Wall,” *Nation* (14 July 1997), 15.

Clubs and Bathhouses Again Popular with Some Gay Men”), Rotello begins his case for closing the baths and sex clubs by drawing a sharp distinction between the unhealthy behaviors of those traumatically rooted in the past and the healthy vision of those who can leave that past behind:

On the one hand is the specter of governmental involvement in gay sexuality, which is something that I don't think that any gay liberationist or self-respecting gay person welcomes. On the other hand is the specter of a continuing epidemic that will continue to take the lives of 40 or 50 or 60 percent of all gay men. A rational person would have to say that the danger of a permanent epidemic is worse. But, unfortunately, in the gay world, many people, on this particular subject, are not rational. Many people are so traumatized by their past as gay men and by the stigma, and they see the resistance of that as their primary motivation in gay liberation, rather than actually the saving of their own community from this cataclysmic holocaust.<sup>8</sup>

“In the best of all possible worlds,” NPR reporter Joe Neel continues, “Gabriel Rotello wants a twenty- to thirty-year period of what he calls sexual conservatism, where gay men have far fewer partners than they do today. That, he says, would break the chain of infection. But that also means a complete break with the past. Gay men must totally rethink the way they conceive their sexual behavior.” Rather than focusing on the historical connections between “normalcy” and its constitutive “stigma,” Rotello blames the sexual culture of gay men for the “holocaust” of AIDS. In so doing, Rotello establishes “sexual conservatism” as the healthy outgrowth of a willed amnesia, the *sine qua non* of gay public life.

For the purposes of the NPR story, addressed to a national audience, Rotello's claim that HIV transmission is the inevitable result of gay men's traumatic attachment to a pathological past serves the segment's paternalism, dressing heteronormativity in the drag of liberal benevolence. Taking its cue from Rotello, the segment becomes a normalizing exercise in the restructuring of gay male memory. In one case, Mike, a “thirty-something professional,” HIV-infected gay man, recounts an experience in a New York bathhouse. Telling Neel, “I became, first, kind of surprised at the amount of chances I had to infect other men,” Mike remembers an experience with a younger man who was willing to have unprotected sex until Mike reveals his

8. National Public Radio, *All Things Considered*, 1 June 1995, purchased print transcript by Burrelle's Transcripts. Subsequent references are from this transcript.

seropositive status, at which point the younger man tenses up and leaves. "I spoke to him later," Mike tells Neel, "and he said, 'I'm really angry that I was ready to take that chance.'" From Mike's anecdote, Neel concludes: "In this atmosphere of uninhibited male sexuality, men forget about safe sex." There is, however, another lesson one could derive from Mike's story: that one of the two men *didn't* forget about safe sex. Not only did a gay man take responsibility for a stranger's health, the later conversation between the two men demonstrates the communication networks that arise from "anonymous" public sex and make the circulation of information and compassion possible. Despite the evidence provided by Mike's anecdote, however, Neel attaches a normative moral to a gay man's memory, a dynamic that becomes even more obvious when its object is a gay historian, Allen Berube, who tells a dissenting story about "uninhibited" gay sex:

For me, it's the adventure of meeting someone you don't know and feeling this erotic charge and you know, exploring them and their bodies and having conversations and having this kind of bond with someone that you never met before and may never meet again. There's this specialness about this kind of intimacy with a stranger, that there's nothing else like it and it's its own thing. . . . There can be magic in those moments that really have a lot to do with trusting strangers. And there's very few places in this society where that can happen.

Neel again glosses a gay man's testimony so as to produce a conventional moral: Despite Berube's description of the trust that can arise in public sex, an account seconded by Mike's bathhouse memory, Neel declares, "In New York, closing some places did send a message to the gay community that danger lurked in bathhouses and clubs." Again, trust established among gay men through sex-cultural codes and presented in the form of a memory narrative turns into a tale of lurking danger. Gay voices raised in opposition to government regulation of public sex are credited in this nationalized debate only when, like Rotello's, they denounce the hedonistic trauma of the gay past, not when they credit, as Mike or Berube do, the alternative public intimacies authorized by gay countermemory.

Attempts to authorize sexual conservatism by normalizing gay memory rely on a strategy I call *counternostalgia*, a look back in fury at the sexual "excesses" of the immature, pathological, and diseased pre-AIDS generation. Counternostalgia operates within a wider discursive assertion

that death necessarily marks a gay man's future because sin has characterized his past, a blame game that makes illness proof positive that the afflicted have lurked in the dark dens of perversion, relinquishing all claims to compassion, comprehension, or credibility. Under pressure from AIDS activists and critics who challenge this narrative of blame, the story shifts from individual victims to the practices of sexual culture more generally, a supposedly less cruel because more abstract gesture. Even if individual gay men are not genetically or psychologically programmed for self-destruction, this story goes, these men have produced a culture, centered on reckless perversion and unthinking abandon, that contains the seeds of death and dissolution. A morbid and pathologizing essentialism is displaced from individuals to the collective, but the causal logic of blame still prevails.

Counternostalgia is dangerous not only because it represents the past inaccurately but also because it limits present options for nonnormative identification, intimacy, and pleasure. The recent resurgence of assimilative political initiatives—for gay marriage, for humane military policy, and for domestic partner benefits, for instance—is sustained by narratives that, in the guise of exposing a corrupt sexual past, directly or implicitly urge queers to distance themselves from the tainted past and to structure their lives along cleaner, healthier lines that end up replicating normative heterosexuality. Working in a culture of sexual paranoia so profound that such ideological work is easily carried out in the guise of common sense, counternostalgia represents sex as a fixed object of moral evaluation, obscures the dominant culture's role in establishing sexual "norms" as a technology of power, and denies the agency of "deviants" who use unsanctioned sex to challenge the normalizing structures of mainstream America.<sup>9</sup>

9. Why gay men would want to serve the interests of a "general public" that has made little effort to serve gay interests is a complex question, and not one I can fully answer. On the most banal level, gay men, as AIDS activists and theorists have long pointed out, are part of that "general public," which not only entitles gays (theoretically) to civil rights and police protection but frequently makes gays agents as well as objects of mainstream thought. Counternostalgia is also partially understandable in light of the fear that led many gay men in the early years of the epidemic, when safer sex education was scarce and changed rapidly, to conceive of celibacy or monogamy as the only viable responses to a sexually transmitted virus. One could argue as well that gay men, shocked at the decimation of a subculture they had worked so hard to create and by the deaths of those with whom they inhabited it, have sought to defend themselves by minimizing the value of what was lost. Finally, there is an implied prophylactic syllogism of blame: If the sexual revolution caused illness, and one distances oneself from the sexual revolution, one is therefore distanced

Nor is counternostalgia the exclusive province of such obvious neocons as Rotello, Signorile, and Sullivan. Indeed, one might argue that counternostalgia, rendered compatible with queerness in cultural and theoretical productions of the late 1980s and early 1990s, to a large degree enabled its pervasive deployment by gay neocons in the late 1990s, and, more than police crackdowns or city regulations, has been responsible for the conservatizing of queer culture and politics generally. One might look, for instance, at Leo Bersani's essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" and Gregg Araki's film *The Living End* (1992), both of which seem as far from Rotello as queers can get from neocons. While queer theorists have rightly denounced Rotello, they have embraced Bersani and hailed Araki's film as the harbinger of a new queer cinema.<sup>10</sup> Yet both the essay and the film exemplify how counternostalgia makes queerness compatible with mainstream social values, paving the way for Rotello and his ilk.

In his 1987 essay, Bersani encourages readers to reject depictions of sex as community building and to acknowledge what sex *really* is, namely, a social "dysfunction" that "brings people together only to plunge them into a self-shattering and solipsistic *jouissance*" that drives them apart. In particular, the rectum, with its potential for ongoing pleasure and its refusal of the finitude of climax, is, for Bersani, "the grave in which the masculine ideal . . . of proud subjectivity is buried."<sup>11</sup> Welcoming stimuli that shatter ego and hence contradicting "the sacrosanct value of selfhood" (RG, 222), the rectum challenges the status of power itself since, Bersani argues, an ego-affirming sexuality generates a phallic social order.

My concern here is less with Bersani's faith in the devastating psychic power of the rectum (although it fails to account for how an asshole can get fucked and still be an asshole) than with how his representation of the relationship between the sexual and the social enables his dismissal

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from illness. See Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 233–45.

10. On Sex Panic's attacks on Rotello and Signorile, see Crain, "Pleasure Principles." Rotello, like other gay journalists who advocate assimilation and invite government regulation, has been called a "turd" by Sex Panic and a "neoconservative" by Michael Warner, who, in his July 1997 editorial in the *Nation*, exhorts queers to ignore Rotello and to heed instead a host of queer theorists, including Leo Bersani. Warner and Berlant cite "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in "Sex in Public," 566. On the queer aesthetics of *The Living End*, see Michael Bronski, "Reel Politick," *Z* (September 1992): 73–75.

11. Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (1987): 222. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as RG.

of the sociosexual narratives of the 1970s. The ego-shattering potential of the rectum has been obscured, according to Bersani, by the “redemptive project” to “rewrite sex” (RG, 221) undertaken by such diverse critics and historians as Simon Watney, Jeffrey Weeks, and Pat Califia. Bersani alleges that these writers carry on “the rhetoric of sexual liberation in the ‘60s and ‘70s” (RG, 219) that, in making sex the basis of community, identity, or politics, inscribes a phallic logic that disguises sex as “self-swelling, as psychic tumescence” (RG, 218). According to Bersani, only Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin join him in having “the courage to be explicit about the profound *moral repulsion* with sex that inspires the entire project” (RG, 215). In exposing the other deluded sons and daughters of the sexual revolution, Bersani offers his bottom line: We must acknowledge and celebrate the valuable “humiliation of the self” (RG, 217) that renders sex “anticomunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving” (RG, 215).

While Bersani’s counternostalgic dismissal of the redemptive histories of the 1970s apparently leads to a queering of identity (politics), it leads as well to the inscription first of women and then of gay men within normative sex/gender constructions. In accounting for misogyny, for instance, Bersani writes, “If, for example, we assume that the oppression of women disguises a fearful male response to the seductiveness of an image of sexual powerlessness, then the most brutal machismo is really part of a domesticating, even sanitizing project” (RG, 221). But what marks women as “powerless” *prior to* the invention of “brutal machismo”? Bersani answers—and his case for the shattering power of the rectum rests on this assertion—by claiming that women are socially powerless by virtue of being penetrated, passively, by the penis. Such a formulation begs the question of how sex comes to be known as penetration and not, say, incorporation, a semantic shift that would make the insertee active and the inserter passive. Bersani asserts the rectum’s power for ego dissolution only by paradoxically inscribing normative gender in ways that render the sexual subject in fixed and limited terms. Bersani seems particularly comfortable generalizing about sex between men who, if one believes the essay, have only anal sex, have never enjoyed sex not centered on the phallus, and lust only after butch men: “Parody is an erotic turn-off, and all gay men know this. Much campy talk is parodic, and while that may be fun at a dinner party, if you’re out to make someone you turn off the camp” (RG, 208). The interpellation at work in Bersani’s essay becomes clear in the pronoun shift from *all* to *you*, and is policed on the border of disclosure and duplicity: Because “all gay men know” the exclusive desirability of butchness, any gay man who claims otherwise is com-

plicit in keeping a “secret” that only Bersani, apparently, is brave enough to speak.<sup>12</sup>

Having disavowed other historical accounts of gay male pleasure, Bersani re-creates “real” gay sex in the image of its most conservative straight counterpart.<sup>13</sup> He compares gay “bottoms” in anal intercourse to (presumably straight) women, who, he joins Dworkin in asserting, can never be “active” during sex. Bersani accounts for violence against children with AIDS, for example, by claiming that they evoke “the infinitely more seductive and intolerable image of a grown man, legs high in the air, unable to refuse the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman” (RG, 212). The “top” in both vaginal and anal intercourse, being “phallic,” becomes implicitly masculine, since women, according to Bersani and Dworkin, can never wield the phallus.

Bersani’s normative rendering of gay male sex as the straight missionary position is connected to his assertion that the “rewriting of sex”

12. In *Gide’s Bent: Sexuality, Politics, Writing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), Michael Lucey astutely analyzes how Bersani’s presentation of a “pure” sex act existing solely in the present is undermined ironically by the very acts—of remembering (inherent in writing) and of projecting a utopian moment when the rectum shatters the ego—that Bersani chastises in others: “When one writes about sex it is not so easy, no matter how hard one wriggles, to distinguish between past, future, and present, between reminiscences, anticipation, and enjoyment. One could write about sex for years and never get to a pure present without politics. Bersani’s shattering present is ultimately inseparable from and even indistinguishable from the past and the future. It carries with it the structure of its own nostalgia” (40).

13. Bersani’s focus on anal intercourse and his metaphoric transformation of it into normative straight sex can be contextualized through Cindy Patton’s description of how the 1986 “Heterosexual AIDS Panic” dramatically changed public discourse about safe sex: “Since among heterosexuals, or at least in the public culture of heterosexual men, penile-vaginal intercourse is the hegemonic and identity-creating act, the meaning of safe sex shifted toward abstinence, monogamy, and the use of condoms.” The heterosexualization of AIDS in the mainstream media then changed sexual discourse in the gay male community, where, after 1986, “safe sex discussions inevitably began with a discussion of the importance of condoms, and only then discussed the range of other possibilities for a fulfilling sex life.” See Patton, *Inventing AIDS* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 47–48. While Patton’s description of the heterosexualization of AIDS may help account for Bersani’s sexual metaphors, it also renders more suspicious the alignment of gay male sexuality with “the public culture of heterosexual men.” Similarly investigating Bersani’s naturalization of anal sex as the missionary position, Michael Lucey wonders “whether by assuming the abject position the gender binary has constructed, [if] the reactivation and perpetuation of that structure could be so definitively resisted—just as one might wonder if one particular way of having sex (and one particular way of imagining what is going on in that act) would be the most analytically evident route to such an end” (Lucey, *Gide’s Bent*, 89).



is undertaken not in response to a decade of antisex rhetoric generated by AIDS hysteria, antiporn feminism, and garden-variety homophobia, but in response to the “moral repulsion” we all feel with the sexual narratives spawned by the “sexual revolution” of the late 1960s and 1970s. In Bersani’s account, not only do the 1980s—the historical moment of the essay itself—get off the hook, its gender norms and anticomunal pursuit of radical individualism are naturalized as psychic truth.

The difficulty of representing alternatives to current sexual conservatism once gay men enter the “amnesia archive” becomes evident in *The Living End*, in which two gay men, Luke and Jon, respond defiantly to their seropositivity by taking to the road, driving aimlessly, shooting up ATMs, and fucking with and without condoms, in public and in private. The appropriated “road-trip” narrative calls attention to and frustrates the abjection that audiences have come to expect as an appropriate closure to the story of AIDS, while it, at the same time, mocks the possibility that a narrative produced in a homophobic culture with intense fears of death and no national health care could or should end “happily ever after.”

While *The Living End* refuses to make individual gay men’s sexual acts the cause of their inevitable despair and demise, it does engage a causal narrative of blame that introduces into the film a tension between two historical narratives: one that Bersani might call redemptive and the other counternostalgic. Counternostalgia enters the film in the scene following the first night Luke and Jon spend together, as Luke explains his AIDS-inspired philosophy over breakfast: “So figure this: There’s thousands, maybe millions of us walking around with this thing inside of us, this time bomb making our futures finite. Suddenly I realize: we got nothing to lose. We can say, ‘Fuck work. Fuck the system. Fuck everything.’ Don’t you get it? We’re totally free. We can do whatever the fuck we want to do.”<sup>14</sup> Luke’s conception of freedom teeters, in this scene, between an oppositional stand toward obligatory capitalism (“Fuck work. Fuck the system”) and the hopeless lack of commitment (“Fuck everything”) that is, according to conventional AIDS narratives, the teleological necessity of an HIV-positive diagnosis. Luke’s inability to sustain opposition without lapsing into despair—his “Fuck everything” ends in his later exasperated claim, “I don’t care about anything anymore”—appears to arise from his attempt to purchase his freedom through

14. All passages quoted from *The Living End* (1992) are from my own transcript of the video release. The film was directed by Gregg Araki, produced by Desperate Pictures, and released by Strand Releasing.

a counternostalgic discourse of generational blame. Immediately preceding the lines quoted above, Luke tells Jon:

I mean, we're both gonna die. Maybe in ten years, maybe next week. But it's not like I want to live forever and get old and fat and die in this ugly, stupid world anyway. I mean, we're victims of the sexual revolution. The generation before us had all the fun, and we get to pick up the tab. Anyone who got fucked before safe sex *is* fucked. I think it's all part of the neo-Nazi, Republican final solution. Germ warfare, you know? Genocide.

If Luke refuses the closure of despair, if he knows he is not to blame for his own seropositivity, he can claim his innocence only by displacing guilt from the individual to the cultural past. It remains unclear, in Luke's account, how the "fun" had by a previous generation of gay men *and* Republican genocide can be responsible for AIDS, but both somehow are; the "sexual revolution," rather than constituting a challenge to conservatism, acts in tandem with the political climate that allowed the epidemic to flourish.

Yet Luke's counternostalgic narrative generates contradictions that come dramatically to the surface at the film's conclusion. For while Luke may want to distance himself from a previous generation of gay men whose "fun" has gotten him in his present fix, only by engaging in what Bersani calls the "*redemptive reinvention of sex*" (RG, 215) as defiance and as the basis of countercultural companionship can Luke express his anger and achieve the agency that helps him escape isolation and despair. In the film's concluding scene, when Jon, sick and disgusted with Luke's antics, decides to go home, Luke rapes him, holding the barrel of a revolver in his own mouth and vowing to pull the trigger as he climaxes. The film has reached the despair that the AIDS narrative seemingly requires as closure. Yet the film diverts the conventional AIDS narrative at the last moment, when Luke throws aside his gun and Jon, who has slapped Luke and walked away, returns. The film's last shot shows Luke and Jon sitting side by side in the middle of an arid landscape, leaning on one another's shoulder. Each turns out to be the other's support, literally and figuratively, in a narrative that stops short of revealing where these men might go next but that also refuses to sentence them to isolation and death-figured-as-suicide.

The film's conclusion suggests, then, that Luke owes more than one debt to the previous generation's enabling fantasy of sex as community and of sexuality as resistance. While counternostalgic discourses that vilify politics or companionship based on sexual pleasure place Jon and Luke in the

overdetermined narratives of inevitable illness (“Anyone who got fucked before safe sex *is* fucked”) and despair (“I mean, we’re gonna die”), the connections they forge from their sexual pleasures, neither entirely arbitrary nor ineffective in opposing hatred, prove the most effective tools for resisting the victimizing narratives of heteronormative national culture. Granted, those older sexual narratives cannot be resurrected uncritically to meet the political demands of the film’s historical moment. Not only has AIDS made it difficult to see some forms of sexual pleasure as liberating (indeed, the film associates Luke’s desire to be fucked without a condom with his other despair-induced suicidal behaviors); it has rendered problematic the equation of sex and liberty not, as Bersani claims, because sex is “anticommunal” or “antinurturing” but because devastating losses, despite heroic efforts, have made liberty itself seem like a utopian project. Yet if the sexual narratives of the 1970s cannot be adapted uncritically, neither, the film seems to suggest, should they be left behind. Given the tension between counternostalgia and sexual redemption, the film shows the latter, while not perfect, to be its protagonists’ best bet for ensuring a living end.

Sexual culture, as Araki’s “road film” makes unmistakably clear, is not a settled space (if one tearoom closes, another will take its place) but a memory of practices, signs, and positionalities that enables tearooms, discos, and cruising areas to travel without disrupting—or at least not for very long—their functions. The impermanence of these spaces, if anything, suggests the resilience of the networks through which culture circulates, for, as Berlant and Warner acknowledge, it is relationships, created through shared memory, that provide the architecture of the queer world. Crack-downs on space alone cannot disrupt a public culture predicated, in many ways, on regulation and diasporic migration, but a crackdown on memory can. I have offered these examples of counternostalgia to show how pervasive the attack on collective and individual memory is, and how closely allied that assault is with the interpellation of gay men within normative public culture. These attacks come not only from the neoconservative “thems” externalized from queer culture by the panic politics of space but from within queer culture itself. Although drawn from three very different genres addressing potentially variant audiences, these accounts reveal how counternostalgia circulates between subculture (Araki’s film) and superculture (NPR), from accounts under attack by queer theory (Rotello) to the theorists that queers have used to challenge those accounts (Bersani). Demonstrating the false purity of a spatial differentiation between theory and journalism, between sub- and national cultures, the circulation of counternostalgia

links these texts in a shared strategy of sexual normalizing that, in structuring the relationship of representation, memory, and identity in a syndrome of blame and disavowal, risks the viability of queer public intimacy and culture.

### 3

The most effective response to counternostalgia has come through what Michel Foucault calls *countermemory*, a competing narrative of the past composed of memories that exceed official public history.<sup>15</sup> Noting that resistant memories show disempowered people “not who they were, but what they must remember having been,” Foucault contends that “if one controls people’s memory, one controls their dynamism. And one also controls their experience, their knowledge of previous struggles.”<sup>16</sup> Knowledge of previous struggles emerges as a specifically queer countermemory, a way to “remember having been” oppositionally and creatively sexual: “Homosexuality is an historic occasion to re-open effective and relational virtualities, not so much through intrinsic qualities of the homosexual, but due to the biases against the position he occupies.”<sup>17</sup> Among the “virtualities” Foucault imagines becoming visible through countermemory are the kinds of social relationships developed in the urban queer spaces: “A way of life can be shared among individuals of different age, status, and social activity. It can yield intense relations not resembling those that are institutionalized. It seems to me that a way of life can yield a culture and an ethics.”<sup>18</sup> For Foucault, gay male desire is itself a form of memory: “For a homosexual, the best moment of love is likely to be when the lover leaves in the taxi. It is when the act is over and the boy is gone that one begins to dream about the warmth of his body, the quality of his smile, the tone of his voice. This is why the great homosexual writers of our culture (Cocteau, Genet, Burroughs) can write so elegantly about the sexual act itself, because the homosexual imagination is for the most part concerned with reminiscing.”<sup>19</sup>

15. Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 160–64.

16. Michel Foucault, “Film and Popular Memory,” in *Foucault Live: Interviews, 1966–84* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1989), 92.

17. Michel Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life,” in *Foucault Live*, 207.

18. Foucault, “Friendship,” 207.

19. Michel Foucault, “Sexual Choice, Sexual Act,” in *Foucault Live*, 224. I am indebted to David Halperin for his insightful analysis of the possibilities for queer politics opened up by

Viewed through the lens of queer memory as set forth by Foucault, intimacy becomes a shared history as much as a shared space; internalized as behavior patterns through its integration into memorial narratives of pleasure, intimacy becomes the basis for a collective futurity.

Gay countermemory has already provided oppositional representations of pleasure that inscribe alternative public intimacies. The ironic titles of three recent novels—Brad Gooch's *Golden Age of Promiscuity* (1996), Ethan Mordden's *How Long Has This Been Going On?* (1995), and Felice Picano's *Like People in History* (1995)—suggest the exclusion of gay men and lesbians from conventional history: Denied a historical “golden age,” gay public life, the mysterious “this” that the mainstream doesn't know is “going on,” has existed as an “intense subtext”<sup>20</sup> of sexual subculture (“promiscuity”). At the same time as they expose the exclusion of gays from conventional history, these novels use countermemories to create communal subjectivity, making sexual culture a site of creative reimagining rather than a dangerous lure or a paradise lost.

Over the course of Mordden's ambitious novel, for instance, memory becomes the means to codify and circulate everyday practices, providing gay men with ways to recognize and communicate with each other in the face of violence, death, or dislocation. Mordden renders the relationship of memory, self-invention, and public intimacy most explicit in the story of Jim and Henry, former college classmates who are surprised to find each other in a New York gay bar. Rather than share conventional reminiscences, Mordden writes, “this time they are going to work out a very different kind of nostalgia—whom they had crushes on in college, who else *was*, what exactly they themselves knew they were—the conversation, in short, that marks the two men's passing from acquaintances to comrades.”<sup>21</sup> These collaborative acts of self-inventive memory predicated on desire—exactly the kinds of memory counternostalgia urges us to forget—create bonds (“One hour of such talk and you can be intimates for life” [*HL*, 233]) that survive homophobic isolation and the debilitating grief caused by AIDS. When, at the conclusion of the novel, Henry, contemplating the present status of gay cultural politics, laments that “probably no political movement in his-

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Foucault's writings on history; see, for instance, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 104–6.

20. Brad Gooch, *The Golden Age of Promiscuity* (New York: Knopf, 1996), 16.

21. Ethan Mordden, *How Long Has This Been Going On* (New York: Villard Books, 1995), 233. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *HL*.

tory counted as little solidarity as this one" (*HL*, 584), his faith is restored by an act of memory. As the Gay Pride march stops to honor the memories of those who have died, Henry remembers his college friend Jim, who died from AIDS the previous year. It is a moment of anguish, but also of renewed optimism, for Henry, for, despite the lack of solidarity in gay life, "on this afternoon, the feeling was unity. This was the one day when everyone in the Life seemed part of a great striding giant of a history that would never cease its advance" (*HL*, 584).

Mordden shows, however, that gay cultural politics are threatened at least as much by the paralyzing generational split caused by counternostalgia—represented in the novel, as in Bersani and Araki, as perfectly consistent with queer "world making"—as by AIDS itself. When Blue, a 1970s hustler turned 1990s AIDS activist, joins a group of twenty-something queers in a chic Lower East Side coffeehouse, he's shocked to hear one woman declare, "'Well, I'm sick of Old Gay . . . Drag, and opera, and Fire Island. *Gyms!*'" (*HL*, 568). The only hope for the future, the novel suggests, lies with those of the younger generation who reject counternostalgia in order to draw survival lessons from the past. In a scene set during Gay Pride Weekend 1991, two young lesbians are watching a documentary on pre-Stonewall gay life. When one woman asks, "'Do you relate to any of this?'" her lover responds, "'It's not us. . . . But it's something. It's history.'" "'Maybe it'll make sense later on,'" the first woman ventures, to which her lover asserts, "'It makes sense to me now'" (*HL*, 559). Only if history "makes sense" can gay countermemories heal the antagonism generated not by AIDS but by counternostalgic discourse that makes community a suspect concept.

While this novel suggests the importance of countermemory for sustaining the cultural practices of those gay men who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, and who have experienced the decimation of their social networks by AIDS, several films have focused on the value of countermemory for younger queers coming of age in a post-AIDS era, asserting, in contrast to counternostalgia, that the past is an invaluable tool in the hands of young queers, not their enemy or their downfall. In *Longtime Companion* (1990), the film hailed as the first mainstream cinematic treatment of AIDS, the concluding sequence shows the three surviving characters standing on the beach at Fire Island, imagining the moment when a cure is found for AIDS. Suddenly crowds of cheering people, including the characters who have died, come running onto the beach from the boardwalk, embracing their living friends. This scene was virulently criticized for its manipulative

and sentimental suggestion that the losses to AIDS will ever be recovered, even in fantasy.<sup>22</sup> But this scene presents a fantasy not of recovery but rather of continuity, of gay men who will use their identification with the past to strengthen their determination to fight in the future. When the fantasy suddenly ends and one of the characters says, "I just want to be there," the word *there* shifts queer community from a spatial to a temporal location, signifying both the past and the future, the lost community envisioned in the fantasy and the future moment when the epidemic ends. Both combine in the speaker, who is moved by his memories of the past to demonstrate against government inaction on AIDS, thereby helping to inscribe gay men's cultural future.

Like other counter-memories, *Longtime Companion* suggests that posing alternatives to counternostalgia can open possibilities for public intimacy and hence strengthen resistance to isolation, guilt, and despair. A number of recent queer films have followed suit in using counter-memory to resist the effects of counternostalgia. Raoul O'Connell's *A Friend of Dorothy* (1995) capitalizes on gay male cultural memory as the source of public intimacy and survival. The film's protagonist, Winston, sets off to Greenwich Village to begin his freshman year at NYU armed with his Barbra Streisand, Bette Midler, and Cher albums. These singers, whom a homophobic character in the film identifies as "fag divas," provide Winston with comfort and, ultimately, a boyfriend. While shopping for a Streisand CD, Winston makes eye contact with a man perusing the Judy Garland selections. After camping for a few moments, the boy asks Winston if he is "a friend of Dorothy's," pre-Stonewall code for "Are you gay?" When Winston answers, "Yes, I guess I am," the man responds, "Someone should teach you to smile when you say that" and asks him out to, of all nostalgic locales, a piano bar. The film ends by suggesting that icons of the gay cultural past continue to provide places to meet, signs of identification, and modes of communication.

22. Although the crowd booed the director and author of *Longtime Companion* when they spoke at a New York Gay Pride rally in 1990, Simon Watney has produced an appreciative reading of the film's fantasy ending that parallels my own. The dream sequence, Watney writes, "speaks of the most simple and passionate wish that none of this had ever happened, that our dearest friends might indeed come back to life again, that we miss them horribly. This is surely not to be dismissed as 'denial' or 'delusion,' but should be understood as a necessary catharsis, and moreover a catharsis that binds our communities even closer in their fight to save lives." See Watney, "Short-Term Companions: AIDS as Popular Entertainment," in *A Leap in the Dark: AIDS, Art, and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Allan Klusacek and Ken Morrison (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1992), 163.

Mark Christopher's film *The Dead Boys' Club*, part of a collection entitled *Boys Shorts* (1994), makes the relationship between memory and public intimacy its central diegetic focus. In the opening sequence, the mise-en-scène suggests that Toby, the young protagonist, is torn between two generations: In one hand, he holds that depressing AIDS emblem, a bottle of bleach, which he brings to his cousin who is cleaning up following the death of a friend; in the other, he holds that account of the gay male sexual revolution, *Dancer from the Dance*. The impact of the novel becomes clear when Toby cruises a man on the street and takes his phone number, but the antiseptic and antisex ethos of his own day reasserts itself when Toby throws the number away. In the following scene, the viewer is introduced to Packard, Toby's gay older cousin, and to Packard's friend Charles, a swishing, wig-wearing queen of the old school, who immediately begins to hit on Toby. The film's contrast between the anxious, undersexed young man and the humorous, sociable older men highlights the generational change that is its central concern and shows that cultural values of the past become more, not less, valuable in the context of AIDS. When the film introduces the older gay men, they are packing up the belongings of a friend who has just died from AIDS. Their wit and shared memories comfort them in their grief. For them, AIDS is not the denouement in a narrative of selfish recklessness but the decimation of a gay culture essential to survival, especially for those caught in the imperatives of counternostalgia. When Toby doesn't know who disco diva Donna Summer is, Charles laments, "Your generation will never know what it missed," to which Packard responds, "I think they do."

The film's principal hook highlights the contrast between the sexual austerity of the present and the sex-positiveness of the past. Packard gives Toby his friend's favorite "slut shoes," and when Toby tries them on, he is given a miraculous view into the sexual underworld of the 1970s, placing him among scantily clad men in leather cruising dark, disco-filled corridors. Toby at first tries to get rid of the shoes, but, representatives of the repressed cultural unconscious that they are, they continually return to him. When he wears them out to a bar one night, he gets picked up by the boy whose phone number he threw away on the street, and, when he wakes up in the morning in the boy's bed and finds the condom Packard gave him still unopened in his pocket, Toby assumes, in the logic of counternostalgia, that his glimpse into the older sexual culture has led him to reckless, unsafe sex. The past has risked his health, Toby believes, and he refuses to see his one-night stand when he returns the shoes Toby has left behind. The film draws the reader away from Toby's counternostalgic conclusions, however,



showing us the open condom packages that Toby cannot see. One-night stands, bar culture, discos—none of these is antithetical to responsibility and health, the film implies; on the contrary, they are potentially the source of companionship and pleasure.

*The Dead Boys' Club* acknowledges that we cannot wholly reclaim the past, for AIDS has changed the past as much for Packard and Charles as for Toby. But to disavow the past, to deny its representational importance for the present and the future, is equally futile, as the trope of the continually returning shoes demonstrates. The past will not be left behind; like the protagonist of Gloria Gaynor's disco hit, it will survive. And if Toby wants to survive, he must accept the past and embrace the mutual responsibility organized around the shared signifier *gay* developed by an older sexual culture that makes safe sex possible between men. Ultimately, Toby reconciles the present with the past: The last time Toby throws the shoes away, a street merchant finds them and places them among his wares. When Toby, apparently rethinking his rejection, reaches for the shoes, his hand touches the hand of another young gay man, who is also reaching for them, and they smile at one another as the film ends. Through his experiences with the past—represented by the community practices of his cousin no less than by the literal view the shoes afford—Toby completes the pass fumbled at the film's start. If completely reentering the past is an impossibility (signified by the contemporary production of '70s footage), the "past" can be rendered as a cultural discourse, as counter-memories, that will enable new and more pleasurable narratives today: endings-in-sex rather than the sex-as-ending that counternostalgia requires. The representations of then and now coexist in the same film as they coexist in the same culture. By accepting that sex equals neither death nor irresponsibility but, rather, companionship, pleasure, and knowledge, Toby ends up recognizing that he shares desires with other men, both living and dead.

In arguing that gay men must reclaim the past as a discourse that enables alternative sexual consciousness and collectivity in the present, I am not arguing that there is a transparency to memory (we all know what the 1970s "meant" to gay men then, or indeed that the decade ever meant the same thing to significant numbers of gay men). The memories people share will be diverse and divergent, and the tension between memory narratives will be productive of necessary change within urban gay culture. An important reminder of such productive tensions is provided by one of the most eloquent memory narratives on film: Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied* (1989). In this powerful documentary of the often violent tensions between African

American and gay male culture, Riggs evokes life in 1970s San Francisco in order to condemn its (and his own internalized) racism:

I pretended not to notice the absence of black images in this new gay life, in bookstores, poster shops, film festivals, even my own fantasies. Something in Oz was amiss, but I tried not to notice. I was intent on my search for my reflection, love, affirmation, in eyes of blue, gray, green. Searching, I discovered something I didn't expect, something decades of determined assimilation cannot blind me to. In this great, gay Mecca, I was an invisible man. I had no shadow, no substance, no place, no history, no reflection.<sup>23</sup>

Tied to his condemnation of gay male racism ("I quit the Castro, no longer my home, my Mecca"), however, is a certain longing, a sense that a more inclusive Castro *would* have been a Mecca, or at any rate a refuge from the homophobia Riggs also condemns in the African American community. Riggs engages in a double act of memory—looking back at the Castro but also back at African American history and his personal home life—in order to create from the doubled rememberings a hybrid memory narrative that allows him to untie his story. Riggs's sound track mixes black gay divas (such as Sylvester) with Billie Holiday and Nina Simone, mixes footage of the March on Selma with that of Gay Men of African Descent marching in a Gay Pride parade. From these nostalgic juxtapositions, Riggs diversifies gay memory ("Each gay community does different things," as one man in the documentary says, "and I think that's cute") and allows a remembering that works for black gay men ("older, stronger rhythms resonate within me, sustain my spirit, silence the clock"). Far from replicating the values of a historical moment, Riggs's countermemory corrects the shortcomings of those values and enhances the possibilities for creating a more viable gay community.

In looking at these examples of queer countermemory, I want to expand the agenda of queer activism and theory beyond the politics of space to a recognition of the important role memory plays in the making and breaking of queer worlds.<sup>24</sup> By taking too casual an approach to memory, we

23. All passages quoted from *Tongues Untied* (1989) are from my own transcript of the video release. The film was directed by Marlon T. Riggs and released by Frameline Distributors.

24. In arguing against the metaphoric deployment of "space" as a totalizing figure for public culture, I do not mean to deny the importance of "queer space" as a material basis for desire and community. See, for example, Aaron Betsky, *Queer Space: Architecture*

risk letting our historiography disastrously change our history. The politics of memory are particularly important in relation to AIDS. Even before the Names Project, a common refrain in the gay community has been that we must not forget those who have died. While these individual acts of memory are urgently important, we must also remember and continue to shape and deploy our memories of social networks, political strategies, and cultural theories, not to idealize or to reinvent the past—an impossible enterprise even if it were desirable—but to think critically about which stories are credited with access to the truth, to the social “real.” Only in so doing will gay men’s sexual representations transform the restrictive and normalizing work of much contemporary culture. In telling different stories of the past, in other words, we are avoiding unnecessary loss and becoming present to ourselves. To look back is, after all, to refuse the imperative laid down at the destruction of Sodom.

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and *Same-Sex Desire* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1997); and Christopher Reed, “Imminent Domain: Queer Space in the Built Environment,” *Art Journal* (winter 1996): 64–70.

