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### Publication Date

2023

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
IRVINE

Fairies Wear Boots:  
Abjection, Identity, AIDS

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Comparative Literature

by

Robert Theodore Barrett

Dissertation Committee:  
Professor Gabriele Schwab, Chair  
Professor Lucas Hilderbrand  
Assistant Professor Alicia Carroll

2023



## DEDICATION

To

Ryan A. White

*You meet a new person, you go with him and suddenly you get a whole new city...  
you go down new streets, you see houses you never saw before,  
pass places you didn't even know were there.  
Everything changes.*

...

*It is not that I have no past.  
Rather, it continually fragments on the terrible vivid ephemera of now.*

...

*"Things have made you what you are," she recited  
"What you are will make you what you will become."*

Samuel R. Delany  
*Dhalgren*

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I do not know that I can fully express my gratitude and appreciation for Professor Gabriele Schwab, my committee chair. There were times that I doubted my decision to return to academia at a later age, and times that I let imposter syndrome get the better of me. However, every time I was in one of Gabriele Schwab's seminars, or talking with her about literature, theory, art, politics, education and pedagogy, I knew I was exactly where I needed to be. Even during our most apocalyptic discussions she somehow manages to give me hope.

My engagement with Queer Studies, and Queer literature, film and art began outside of the academic world, and accelerated when I began working at an LGBTQ+ bookstore, A Different Light Bookstore on Castro Street in San Francisco, at the age of twenty. Our manager at the bookstore allowed employees to check out any book they wanted, and I took full advantage of this policy, voraciously going through the vast amount of Queer cultural content in the store. Then, during my first year at University of California, Irvine, I met with Professor Lucas Hilderbrand for assistance in developing a reading list in Queer Studies. During our first meeting, he asked me about my interests, then began pulling books from his bookshelf and assembling a *very large* stack of books on his desk. He said something like "Start by reading these." I do not think Professor Hilderbrand was aware of how excited I was looking at that stack of books; it opened a whole new world of Queer cultural content to me. Thank you for being my Queer Studies guide.

I would also like to thank Assistant Professor Alicia Carroll. For most of my life I have not shared my Native American background openly, as when I did, I was usually met with comments like, "but you're not really an Indian, you grew up in the suburbs," or "you don't really look native." These kinds of reactions even made me question my family's authenticity as Native Americans, despite our Tribal Citizenship. Thank you for allowing me to examine my own ideas of authenticity when it comes to my Native American heritage, and allowing me to embrace my diasporic Native American background

Additionally, I need to thank Associate Professor Adriana Michéle Campos Johnson. My first seminar with Adriana Johnson was extremely challenging for me, and I felt ill-prepared in comparison to the other students. But she never made me feel out of place. I truly appreciate Adriana Johnson's unending support throughout my graduate studies.

I would also like to thank *Soapbox Journal for Cultural Analysis*, a peer-reviewed open-access journal. Portions of "Chapter 3: Jerome Caja's Abject Ascension" will be published in their special print issue, *Soapbox 4.0; Interface* (2023), as "(Queer) Canonisation and Patron-Saint Affect: Abjection, Identification, Interface." Finally, I would like to thank Anthony Cianciolo at the Jerome Project for all his support and assistance.

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Fairies Wear Boots: Abjection, Identity, AIDS

by

Robert Theodore Barrett

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

University of California, Irvine, 2023

Professor Gabriele Schwab, Chair

*Fairies Wear Boots* explores the imbrication of the early HIV/AIDS pandemic in the United States with queer identity. Responding to being labeled as abject—that which a majoritarian sphere casts out and denies a connection to—queer subjects have defiantly inhabited the abject and self-authored their stigmatized identities. But, how can this be done without reproducing the conditions of one’s expulsion in the first place? Looking at experimental autobiography, the early part of the AIDS epidemic as a historical setting in contemporary novels, and the artist Jerome Caja’s performance and self-depiction as an abject saint, I look to find ways of performing the abject that seek to expand the circle of inclusion rather than fighting for assimilation in a system that sees you as abject. Through examining how AIDS, homophobic violence and social expulsion form an oppositional, but fractured, identity, my intention is not to create a discourse of victimhood, but to think about how self-authoring one’s abject status holds a funhouse mirror up to the majoritarian sphere, and allows us to envision a more inclusive future.

## Introduction: Whose Fairyland?

Yeah, fairies wear boots and you gotta believe me  
Yeah I saw it, I saw it, I tell you no lies  
Yeah, fairies wear boots and you gotta believe me  
I saw it, I saw it with my own two eyes, all right now!

— Black Sabbath, “Fairies Wear Boots,” (1970).

In *Fairyland: A Memoir of my Father* (2013), Alysia Abbott describes growing up in San Francisco, from 1974 until shortly after her father’s death due to AIDS related complications in December of 1992. Alysia Abbott likens her San Francisco life with her father—the poet, author, artist and editor Steve Abbott<sup>1</sup>—to a sort of fairyland, as if her childhood—deeply enmeshed in the San Francisco queer and countercultural world, and literary scenes of the late nineteen-seventies and eighties—were something unreal, or otherworldly. A. Abbott was raised by her father Steve, an openly gay man, since her mother Barbara’s tragic death when she was only two years-old.

A. Abbott herself identifies as heterosexual, and in the Epilogue of *Fairyland* writes; “the life I live is very different from the life we shared, one dad [S. Abbott] might even consider bourgeois” (317). But, through the process of writing and researching her memoir of her father, A. Abbott has the opportunity to reconnect with her past, figuratively and literally. In the “preface” to the paperback edition of *Fairyland*, A. Abbott describes how her book tour and the publicity surrounding the release of the hardback edition of the book continued the many recollections and reconnections that researching and writing her memoir inspired. “I was completely unprepared for the stream of characters who reentered my life,” she writes (xii). This

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<sup>1</sup> For the rest of this introduction, I will use A. Abbott for as an abbreviation for Alysia, and S. Abbott as an abbreviation for Steve.

process allows her to reconnect her adult life, one her father “might even consider bourgeois,” to her untraditional childhood. A. Abbott writes;

For much of my adult life I’ve felt alone. Especially after my father died, I understood myself through my orphan-hood. But after publishing *Fairyland*, I realize just how connected I really am. The family my father created for me, though untraditional, is far-reaching. These people are simply part of my expanding family—new uncles and aunts, long-lost cousins, and half-siblings—all joined together through a shared history. (xiii)

In her childhood and early adult years she had tried to “hold inside” anything that might be seen as shameful, or that would cause others to see her as abnormal. When she was five-and-a-half years old, and had just started attending a new school, she began having a problem with wetting herself. She associates this with an embarrassment over asking to use the restroom. She did not have these accidents at home, or anywhere else; she only wet herself at school. Retrospectively, she associates these incidents of losing control of her bladder with “a desire to disappear” (62). A. Abbott writes; “I didn’t want to call attention to myself by asking to go to the bathroom” (62). Afraid of calling attention to herself, she held in her urine, until, against her will, it would come flowing out, arguably creating a more embarrassing scene than if she had just asked to use the bathroom in the first place. A. Abbott, in trying to understand her childhood behavior, writes; “I’d grown accustomed to holding inside anything that was too embarrassing or too shameful to share: my dad’s boyfriends, my mom’s death, my pee” (62). What A. Abbott does not realize as a child is that shame can never be fully prevented. As Martha Nussbaum writes; “Because we all have weaknesses that, if known, would mark us off as in some ways ‘abnormal,’ shame is a permanent possibility in our lives, our daily companion” (173). These accidents with wetting herself caused her to get bullied. Other girls would force her to drink

water, then tell her to pee in her clothes. However, she never went to her father for help. “I could have told Dad about the bullies at school, but deep down I suspected he was more the source of my problem than its solution” (63). She was also “holding inside” her father’s sexuality as something “too embarrassing or too shameful to share.” “I never talked openly with any of my friends and extended family about Dad’s orientation,” she writes, “his sexuality was a secret I held on to long after it was useful to do so, a secret I held on to until the physical manifestation of his illness forced me to come out” (71). The physical manifestations of illness A. Abbott refers to here are the visible markers of AIDS. When she is in her final year at NYU, her father’s health deteriorated rapidly, and she was forced to graduate early and move home to San Francisco to care for him. It is only at this point that she tells her maternal grandparents about her father’s sexuality, when she can no longer deny it. It is interesting that A. Abbott, a heterosexual woman, uses the term “come out” here. Often, we only consider LGBTQ+ folk as “coming out,” but A. Abbott, raised in a nontraditional, countercultural, and homosexual environment, which she had actively kept hidden, feels that her closeted identity as “abnormal” is no longer able to be hidden once her father’s HIV+ status becomes visible through the recognizable markings of AIDS, such as physical wasting and Kaposi Sarcoma.

A. Abbott’s tendency to hold inside what might mark her as abnormal and result in shame inhibits her from identifying with her own history. It is this lack of identification that renders her past a fairyland. Martha Nusbaum writes; “The idea of normalcy is like a surrogate womb, blotting out intrusive stimuli from the world of difference....But of course, this stratagem requires stigmatizing some other group of persons” (219). A. Abbott’s lack of identification affected her ability to grieve the loss of so many people in her life due to AIDS. In the epilogue to her memoir, A. Abbott narrates a moment of her research for the composition of her memoir;

Working late one night, with my kids and husband sleeping peacefully upstairs, I decided, for the first time, to research the *B.A.R.* obituary database. The *B.A.R.*, or *Bay Area Reporter*, where dad sometimes covered books and arts, was an important barometer of the AIDS epidemic, the papers dramatically thickening as the number of dead increased...Sitting in the dark alone, I easily found the obituaries of friends...Then I searched out names from Dad's journals...Then I just started browsing, randomly clicking on names, reading stories and staring at picture after picture of the dead. All of these Peter Pans, young men frozen in their eighties haircuts and sweaters, never to realize the potential of that first book of poetry, that well-received play or generous heart...And soon I was sobbing, sobbing until my eyes were puffy like a boxer's. I felt battered with grief. How strange, I thought, when the crying finally subsided. I'm not gay. I'm not a member of this generation of men that lost so many friends that whole phone books had to be tossed. This grief, I now realize, has always been with me. I'd just never located it. (Fairyland 317)

Here Abbott demonstrates that she had held within her an unaddressed grief, a grief that she questions her identification with; "How strange, I thought...I'm not gay," she thinks to herself. This suggests that somehow, she has received a message that only gay men are allowed to grieve for the generational loss of a whole section of society due to HIV/AIDS. Or, through identifying with this grief, she herself would have been perceived as abnormal, and therefore susceptible to stigma. Erving Goffman claims that attributing stigma to the other is a way to maintain one's self-understanding as "normal"; for someone who identifies themselves as normal, the stigmatized person is "the person he is normal against" (Goffman 6). There is a historical separatism evidenced here that emerges from the imbrication of gay men with HIV/AIDS (It was

*not* only gay men that died of AIDS, *and* people continue to die of AIDS and experience HIV related complications world-wide). But, beyond that, you don't have to be gay to grieve the deaths of gay men, and to feel a sense of loss over the possibilities that were erased by this disease. You don't have to be gay to feel the empty sociocultural hole left behind by the AIDS pandemic. This idea that HIV/AIDS only affected gay men, and has no effect on the heterosexual nuclear family unit is so strong that even a woman raised by a single, homosexual father who died of AIDS, along with many of his friends that she grew up with, somehow feels that a sociocultural history of HIV/AIDS is something that she has not been able to actively identify with. But while browsing through the *B.A.R.* obituary archive—necessitated by the process of researching and writing her memoir, which makes public so much that she had held within her—her grief uncontrollably pours out of here, much like her urine when she was a little girl.

What I have referred to as a historical separatism as regards the early part of the *ongoing* HIV/AIDS pandemic is fortified in many ways. First, through a historical elision, but also through a sense of ownership of the early part of the HIV/AIDS epidemic by gay men. Gay men laying claim to AIDS renders those that have died of HIV/AIDS, as well as those that experience grief and trauma due to the pandemic, but do or did not identify as gay as historically illegible, and/or disenfranchised from this history. A. Abbott writes “Those that hadn't lived through the epidemic would come to know almost nothing of it, as a cultural amnesia set in. The heavy warlike losses of the AIDS years were relegated to queer studies classrooms, taught as gay history and not American history” (315). A. Abbott is highlighting how HIV/AIDS and its history is historicized discretely, and placed in a gay or queer history bubble, allowing for this history's further erasure. But the impacts of HIV/AIDS are broad and ongoing. When A. Abbott returns to San Francisco from college to care for her ailing father, she writes that AIDS had

changed San Francisco; “The street I grew up on was changing. Some transformations between 1987 and 1992 might have been the effects of the economic recession, but much was the result of the AIDS crisis, as members of the city’s gay population went into retreat, either dying or caring for those dying, or else living in a perpetual state of shock about the deaths taking place behind so many closed doors” (215). These changes wrought by AIDS had (and still have) widespread ramifications, not only for LGBTQ+ folk.<sup>2</sup>

Abbott’s inability to identify with her own past, so that it seems like a fairyland, is also an aspect of how societies maintain a social order. It is through constructing a social order and a system of classification that the concept of dirt is created, as that which is unwanted. Mary Douglas writes; “Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the byproduct of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements” (36). “Dirt” itself is subjective, and culturally/situationally dependent, and what is labeled as “dirt,” or “dirty,” is what is rejected in order to maintain a social understanding of appropriateness. Much of our ideas about sexuality and gender are merely social constructs we rely on to maintain some semblance of order in our chaotic existence. As Douglas argues; “I suggest that many ideas about sexual dangers are better interpreted as symbols of the relation between parts of society, as mirroring designs of hierarchy or symmetry which apply in the larger social system” (4). Following from this, Douglas claims; “It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created” (4). Douglas’ work in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), along with the work of

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<sup>2</sup> For example, see Sarah Schulman’s work, which in part links the devastation of AIDS with urban gentrification, in *Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

Freud and Lacan, can be seen as foundational for Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection (which I will discuss below). To conceive of something as abject serves two primary purposes, to define one's self against that which one denies any connection to, and to fortify one's conception of a solid and permanent individuality; the first of which is evidenced by the construction of conceptual binaries such as alive and dead, body and soul, masculine and feminine, or heterosexual and homosexual, while the second connotes reactions to exposed viscera and other markers of the impermanence and permeability of the body, such as shit and vomit, or decomposing corpses and severed limbs. Much like Erving Goffman's contention that "the stigmatized and the normal are part of each other" (135), the abject is also constituted from within, although we would like to deny our connection to it. In the chapters that follow, I will examine how being stigmatized, and cast out as abject, relates to identity formation. I will focus on how LGBTQ+ folk respond to the label of abject, and create techniques of survival within an exclusionary system. I will also argue for an integrated history, in order to prevent further elision, and show how artistic (visual, literary, performance) and political reactions to HIV/AIDS by LGBTQ+ folk are in conversation with wider swathes of culture. I will use abjection as a reference throughout, because abjection is relational, and HIV/AIDS brought the pervasive rejection of gay men and their cultural forms of expression to the fore of social consciousness. As S. Abbott writes; "what's cast out as 'marginal' has to be first within. This is what returns to haunt, a Tell-Tale Heart... Who's really who when anyone says us?" (*View Askew* 40). As S. Abbott highlights, counterculture is never external to culture, but demonstrative of a relationship of rejection and power. And, the abject relationship has an effect on identity. When you no longer see identity as fixed, but as constructed and inconstant, you are still susceptible to the spoiled and stigmatized identity projected upon you due to how you are perceived by another.



And, sharing in a stigmatized identity that is projected upon one's self can create community. In turn, those that perform the abject position tend to resonate with those who have felt cast out in a way that inspires abreaction. Below I will discuss the historical entanglement of HIV/IDS with gay men in the US, and abjection as a relationship. I will also examine how some individuals inhabit the abject subject position and perform or reauthor it, transgressing the social order. Finally, I will introduce each chapter.

### AIDS and Gay Identity

In 1987, Paula Treichler observed that “the AIDS epidemic—with its genuine potential for global devastation—is simultaneously an epidemic of a transmissible lethal disease and an epidemic of meanings or signification” (32). The AIDS pandemic, from the very start, was saturated with meanings and signification constructed from biases and fears, and histories of stigmatizing discourse around sexually transmitted diseases, homosexuality, gender, sexuality, race and economic class. And, this “Epidemic of Signification” is underpinned by mainstream cultural narratives that are used to try to make sense of something that does not really make sense at all, human life and the universe in which we live.

In the early part of the AIDS epidemic in North America, when HIV was still yet to be identified, the first *known* cases were gay men, followed shortly after by IV drug users. Even before scientists were able to determine that the plethora of illnesses they were witnessing were due to a sexually transmitted virus, the syndrome that would come to be called AIDS was linked to behaviors such as the use of Poppers<sup>3</sup>, homosexuality, and promiscuity in general. Treichler, in

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<sup>3</sup> Alkyl Nitrates inhaled as recreational drugs. Poppers are closely associated with gay men, nightclub culture, and anal sex.

“AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification,” details many of these early theories, including the belief that perhaps semen and sperm are innately toxic and kill the immune system, but women, “the ‘natural’ receptacles for male sperm, have evolved over millennia so that their bodies can deal with these foreign invaders” (47), while gay men—figured in this theory as “unnatural” receivers of sperm—are slowly being killed by it.

In this way, the syndrome we would come to know as AIDS became fixed to an idea of punishment for an accumulation of activities associated with negative public perceptions. And, as Marika Cifor points out, “meanwhile, the epidemic also raged in Black and brown communities where it was less visible to the media and therefore to the straight white cisgender general public, policy makers, biomedical researchers, and, Dan Royles notes, in many cases to affected ‘communities themselves’” (9). The spectacle of gay white men dying, and the stigmatized activities associated with their deaths, anal sex, promiscuity, drugs, homosexuality in general, etc., obscured the fact that those who were not white cisgender men, and did not identify as men who have sex with men, were dying as well. Reflecting on the stigmatizing discourse on their activities, gay men began to ask themselves how much promiscuity was too much, and whether this was just about sex, or a combination of socially disavowed activities, creating major rifts in the gay community. This entanglement of AIDS, gay identity, and morality became enmeshed quite easily, as “the historical construction of homosexual identity as an inherently pathological subjectivity formed the powerful subtext of contemporary journalistic representations of AIDS as ‘the gay plague’” (Marshall 65). What I am saying here is that a history of pathology easily (re)asserts itself through morality when blame is searching for an attachment, or when society is searching for a scapegoat in order to preserve a belief in a just or fair world.

Despite the fact that the mode of transmission had not as yet been identified, Larry Kramer, in 1983, wrote “I am sick of guys who moan that giving up careless sex until this blows over is worse than death,” for which he was largely criticized in the gay community. At the same time, Paul Monette, writing about the autumn of 1983, when the first of his close friends began to fall ill, claims; “Gay men in the high purlieus of West Hollywood—that nexus of arts and decoration, pageantry, publicity, fifteen minutes in a minisport—would imply with a quaff of Perrier that AIDS was for losers. Too much sleaze, too many late nights, very non-Westside” (19), drawing attention to divides of economic class within the gay community.

And, of course, it was proven conclusively that AIDS was spread by sexual contact—in large part due to the willing participants in a Center for Disease Control study<sup>4</sup>, of which the most notable participant was Gaëtan Dugas, who was unfairly labeled as “Patient Zero”—and eventually the virus that was to be named HIV was determined to be the root cause for the conglomeration of syndromes named AIDS. And so, while blame was passed around in the gay community, spurred by confusion, a lack of information, government inactivity, and pre-existing economic class and racial divides, political and religious leaders heaped derision on AIDS sufferers and the gay community in general, such as Jesse Helms and William Dannemeyer calling for AIDS quarantines and William F. Buckley suggesting that people with AIDS should be forcibly tattooed by the government.<sup>5</sup> These reactions by the likes of Helms, Dannemeyer and

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4 This study, led by David M. Auerbach, William W. Darrow, Harold W. Jaffe, and James Curran, was published in *The American Journal of Medicine*, Vol. 76, March 1984, as “Cluster of Cases of the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome: Patients Linked by Sexual Contact.” Commonly referred to as the Los Angeles Cluster Study, the focus was on transmission. The Auerbach, Darrow, Jaffe and Curran study should not be confused with the two separate studies, one led by Robert Gallo and the other led by Luc Montagnier, that initially identified the virus that would come to be known as HIV in 1986. Both of these studies were published in *Science*, Vol. 220, Issue 4599, May 20, 1983.

5 Other AIDS moralists of note would be Pat Buchanan, Jerry Falwell, Norman Podhoretz, etc.

Buckley were predictable, as all had been known as anti-homosexual prior to the emergence of AIDS. As Susan Sontag notes; “professional fulminators can’t resist the rhetorical opportunity offered by a sexually transmitted disease that is lethal” (60-61). Sontag’s observation points to how expected it was for individuals that were pre-disposed to anti-homosexual rhetoric to affix AIDS with a moral imperative, but why would gay men themselves accept, and perpetuate, the idea that there could be some sort of moral lesson to learn from AIDS? Well, one reason is the biases existing within the LGBT community at the time, such as racism, transphobia, classism, etc. And another is the psychic life of trauma and shame stemming from social and familial rejection. And, perhaps, some were just trying to make sense of HIV/AIDS in the only way they knew how, assuming that there must be some reason or purpose behind a disease that seemed to be targeting those that society rejects.

One of the possible side effects of viewing one’s illness as deserved is that you have no motivation to fight for increased government spending on research, access to clinical trials, insurance coverage, non-discrimination, access to hospitals, sympathetic medical services, etc. Basically, feeling like a deserving victim has the potential to disincline individuals from fighting all the fights that AIDS activists needed to fight during the early part of the epidemic. And, these fights were necessary because AIDS was seen as a disease for outsiders and deviants, external to the protected, predominantly white, cisgender, middle-class heteropatriarchal nuclear family unit; something lurking in the liminal regions of society wiping out those that were “undesirable” in the first place. With this in mind, it became necessary for LGBTQ+ cultural productions to seek to disentangle AIDS from morality, and show that HIV/AIDS has had, and continues to have, an effect on American society as a whole, rather than just being part of an outsider history. However, meanings and signification culturally bound to AIDS are so deeply entrenched from

the moment of its very emergence in the social consciousness that it is difficult to disentangle. Even well-meaning narratives can perpetuate negative associations.

Becoming aware of my homosexuality in the late 1980s in the San Francisco Bay Area meant coming out into AIDS. I was six years old when the first cases of AIDS were being reported, so I don't remember a time when my conception of homosexuality wasn't entwined with HIV and AIDS. Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore writes that we often hear of two LGBTQ+ generations, "the first coming of age in the era of gay liberation, and then watching entire circles of friends die of a mysterious illness as the government did nothing to intervene...[and the second] growing up in an era offering effective treatment and prevention, and unable to comprehend the magnitude of the loss" (13-14). Sycamore explains that there is an alienating divide between these two generations. I fit somewhere between, and my identity as a gay man and as a queer has been indelibly marked by AIDS. Sycamore writes; "but there is another generation between these two—one that came of age in the midst of the epidemic with the belief that desire intrinsically led to death, internalizing this trauma as part of becoming queer" (14). Of course, I know that AIDS is not a gay disease, but it is difficult to completely eradicate a culturally embedded message from your psyche.

It is important for me to point out here that the seemingly inextricable societal connection between gay men and HIV in the history of the North American AIDS pandemic is and has always been harmful, not only because of the increased stigmatization of homosexuality, but also for those HIV+ individuals that are not cisgender gay men, as the social imbrication of AIDS and male homosexuality, especially white cisgender male homosexuality, tended to render other HIV+ individuals invisible, and sometimes blocked them from testing, counseling, and care. The rendering of AIDS as a 'gay disease' resulted in a lack of services and outreach for

non-homosexually identified individuals, people of color and women. Additionally, this understanding of HIV/AIDS resulted in the exclusion of women from clinical trials and drug studies, and a disproportionate amount of AIDS service organizations (such as anonymous testing sites) being located in gayborhoods that were/are overwhelmingly middle class and white, effectively limiting their accessibility for women, people of color and lower income folks. And, as Cathy J. Cohen points out, “the absence of a specific focus on African American communities [in the first newspaper articles and news reports of 1981 and ’82 that highlighted the disease] led many in this group to believe that this disease was not about them (*Boundaries of Blackness*, 79). The understanding of AIDS as a disease for gay cisgender white men still has negative resonances today globally. These are just some of the ongoing issues that arose from socially constructing HIV/AIDS as a “gay disease.”<sup>6</sup>

Gay Plague, Gay Cancer, and Gay-Related Immunodeficiency (G.R.I.D.) were terms affixed to the symptoms of the as yet undiscovered Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) in the early 1980s. Despite the fact that these names were thrown over for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) as the preferable name for the manifestations of HIV quite early in the pandemic, the association of AIDS with gay men stuck. This association, along with the links to IV drug users and sex workers, was arguably responsible for the Reagan administration’s well-documented inaction in the face of a rising viral crisis. My first interactions with older LGBTQ+ people were facilitated by volunteer work for AIDS organizations. The first times my

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<sup>6</sup> For more on this, I highly recommend the following books and chapters: *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* by Cathy Cohen; “‘They Want Us Sick’: Ballroom Culture and the Politics of HIV/AIDS,” from the book *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit*, by Marlon M. Bailey; *Lessons From The Damned: Queers, Whores, and Junkies Respond to AIDS* by Nancy E. Stoller; *Killing Us Quietly: Native Americans and HIV/AIDS* by Irene S. Vernon, and *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* by Ann Cvetkovich, especially the chapter, “AIDS Activism and Public Feelings: Documenting ACT UP’s Lesbians” etc.

parents allowed me to spend time in San Francisco was working for the San Francisco AIDS walk; I phone banked for them in their offices when I was fifteen years-old. I remember feeling so excited to meet LGBTQ+ adults who were out and open, but that excitement was tempered by the somberness of the work.

The inextricable linkage between AIDS and gay men functions psychically, discursively, and aesthetically. As such, during the early part of the epidemic, which I will define as 1980-1997, gay “identity” was enmeshed and entangled with AIDS. This entanglement of gay identity with AIDS (along with sex workers and IV drug users) perpetuated the socially constructed moral link to HIV, in which some sufferers of AIDS (hemophiliacs who acquired the virus through blood transfusions, and the partners of “dishonest” or “unfaithful” individuals) were seen as “innocent victims,” while most were seen as somehow getting what they deserve.

The continued life of AIDS/HIV’s imbrication with homosexuality, and stigmatized sexuality is evidenced in two contemporary books by young authors: Camryn Garrett’s novel *Full Disclosure* (2019) and Paige Rawl’s *Positive: A Memoir* (2014). Garrett’s novel deals with a teenager’s fear about the other students in her San Francisco high school finding out that she is HIV+. Simone, the protagonist, was born HIV+, then adopted by her two gay fathers. Although the novel does not explicitly reveal what year it is set in, we know it is a contemporary setting right from the start as the first chapter features a discussion between Simone and her gynecologist about undetectable viral loads, and how an HIV+ person who has had an undetectable viral load for more than six months reaches durably undetectable status, wherein the virus becomes untransmittable. While waiting to ask her gynecologist questions, Simone thinks to herself “I know a lot about HIV—including the U=U rule” (7). U=U means undetectable equals untransmittable. This language wouldn’t have come into common usage until after three

major studies, published between 2016 and 2018,<sup>7</sup> making the novel's setting not before 2016. The first person she told about her HIV+ status, her best friend and first girlfriend, rejected her upon Simone's willing disclosure, then spread the news across their school without Simone's consent, resulting in Simone needing to switch schools before her Junior year of high school. The novel takes place during her first year at a new school, and she is afraid that an unauthorized disclosure of her HIV+ status will happen again. And, of course, it does, when an anonymous student reveals Simone's HIV+ status on a school related Twitter account. The first reactions posted on Twitter call Simone's actions into question, demonstrating the ongoing stigmatic association with HIV as a somehow deserved virus. Students tweet things such as "Oh boo hoo!! Are we supposed to care that she made bad decisions?" and "this is what happens when you sleep around I mean we dont even know where she came from [sic]" (227). And, when Simone first returns to campus after the disclosure, she finds "NO SLUTS AT THIS SHOOL" scrawled on her locker in red marker, despite the fact that she is a virgin (242). These reactions to the disclosure of Simone's HIV+ status reveal an ongoing link between HIV/AIDS and moral judgments, as if HIV infection is *deserved* by those that have unprotected sex, or too much sex, and that anyone HIV+ must have engaged in *risky* behaviors. Sontag, in a discursive history of

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<sup>7</sup> The HPTN 052 study first published results in 2011 (Cohen MS, Chen YQ, McCauley M, Gamble T, Hosseinipour MC, Kumarasamy N, et al. (August 2011). "[Prevention of HIV-1 infection with early antiretroviral therapy](#)". *The New England Journal of Medicine*. **365** (6): 493–505.), but continued for another four years, with final conclusions published in 2016 (Cohen MS, Chen YQ, McCauley M, Gamble T, Hosseinipour MC, Kumarasamy N, et al. (September 2016). "[Antiretroviral Therapy for the Prevention of HIV-1 Transmission](#)". *The New England Journal of Medicine*. **375** (9): 830–9). This was followed by the PARTNER (Partners of People on ART—A New Evaluation of the Risks) study, with results published in 2016 (Rodger AJ, Cambiano V, Bruun T, et al. Sexual Activity Without Condoms and Risk of HIV Transmission in Serodifferent Couples When the HIV-Positive Partner Is Using Suppressive Antiretroviral Therapy. *Journal of the American Medical Association*. 2016;316(2):171–181). However, both of these first studies focused on heterosexual couples, so undetectable equals untransmittable was not fully supported until the Opposites Attract study was published in 2018 (Ravington, Pinto, Phanuphak, Grinsztejn, Prestage, Zablotska-Manos, et al. (August 2018). "Viral suppression and HIV transmission in serodiscordant male couples: an international, prospective, observational, cohort study". *The Lancet*. 5 (8): E438-E447).



“plague,” tells us that considering illness as a punishment is the oldest idea of what causes illness (45). The post that states “we don’t even know where she came from” also suggests that Simone is some kind of other, from somewhere else, continuing a link with HIV/AIDS as a corrupting invader. “There is a link between imagining disease and imagining foreignness” claims Sontag (48).

*Full Disclosure* was published when Garrett was nineteen-years-old, but she completed the novel while she was still in high school (Morris). In her author’s note, Garrett writes “I’m still shocked I didn’t learn any of this in school” (293). Garrett went to a school that taught only abstinence, so she herself had lots of questions about sex, and barely knew anything about HIV/AIDS before she began researching her novel (*We Need Diverse Books*). Through her research, Garrett began to see that there had been many scientific advances when it comes to HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention since the beginning of the Pandemic, but the stigma attached to AIDS from its very emergence was still alive and well. Garrett writes,

A lot of the stories and narratives I saw about HIV positive teens seemed to have been made a long time ago, so there was a lot of fear about dying and not having a future.

While doing research, I saw that there have been so many medical advances made, and what seemed to be more of a pressing issue to me was the stigma (although the fact that medication can remain inaccessible due to price is also a huge problem.) I wanted to write about a girl with HIV who wasn’t afraid of dying and knew she’d have a normal life, but who had to contend with people’s ignorance and outdated ideas instead. (Fanna)

And we see people’s ignorance and outdated ideas in *Full Disclosure*. The negative reactions Simone is exposed to upon her unauthorized disclosure are not limited to her fellow students, but extend to their parents as well. On the opening night of their high school production of *Rent*,

with Simone acting as the student director, there is a protest. As Simone walks by the protesters, she hears a woman say “I can’t believe they’re continuing with the play...It was an inappropriate choice in the first place, but now, with that student director? Are they trying to make some sort of a statement?” (263). *Rent: School Edition*—which was made available for High School productions in the 2008-2009 school year—did cause controversy across the United States, despite the fact that language was changed and one song was removed from the original musical in order to make it more appropriate for High School productions (Healey). However, in *Full Disclosure*, the parental objections are not only focused on the content of the musical, but parents seem to object to Simone’s HIV+ status, and her role as student director as well.

Garrett’s narrative surrounding the ongoing stigma attached to HIV/AIDS despite the scientific progress in treatment and transmission reduction are supported by *Positive: A Memoir* (2014) by Paige Rawl with Ali Benjamin, which tells Paige’s story about being born HIV+, and what happened after she told her best friend about her HIV+ status in the sixth grade, during the 2006-2007 school year. Near the end of Sixth grade, Paige is at an all-night “Lock-in” event at her middle school. This is a chaperoned, over-night event on the school campus. Her best friend tells her about a sick family member, and in an attempt to help her best friend understand that everyone has something to deal with, she tells her of her HIV+ status. Later that same evening, everyone at the event seems to know. Rawl didn’t understand that there was a difference between HIV and other ailments. She didn’t understand the stigma, although she and her mother had known of their HIV+ statuses since Rawl was two-years-old. However, that night at the “Lock-in,” while some kids were passing around a water bottle and shortly after revealing her HIV+ status to her best friend, Rawl heard one boy say “Careful...Don’t drink after her. She has AIDS” (62). After this incident, Rawl writes, “I knew something...just by the way he said it. I

knew that my HIV wasn't the same as my asthma or somebody else's knee troubles. It was clear from how he said it that there was something really wrong with having HIV" (63). Soon after, students start repeatedly heckling her with the nickname "PAIDS." This is followed by Rawl seeing "PAIGE HAS AIDS. Slut. Go home" written on the bathroom wall and finding a note in her notebook that says "you bitch. You hoe" (113). Rawl was twelve years-old at the time, and she was confused by these responses. She writes, "I still thought HIV was like any other disease. I knew people with diabetes. I knew people with arthritis. I knew people with high blood pressure and eczema and cavities and farsightedness. Perhaps if I'd understood that HIV had originally been seen—unlike those other conditions—as a disease of outcasts, I wouldn't have been as confused by people's reactions to me" (109). As a reader it is heartbreaking to hear about a child being treated like this by their peers, but what is so confounding is that children in 2007 are aware of, and keeping alive, the stigmatic associations with HIV/AIDS, leading them to assume that this twelve-year-old is somehow a "slut."

In both *Positive* and *Full Disclosure*, the social condemnation of these HIV+ children is severe. Both stories mention Ryan White, a child who was barred from attending school and shunned by his community after his HIV+ diagnosis in 1984, as Simone and Paige's experiences are quite similar to his, despite the years of research and medical advancements since Ryan White's diagnosis, struggles, and death. What is interesting is that both Paige, and Garrett's protagonist Simone, have undetectable virus loads due to their HIV medication, which makes the virus untransmittable. However, the reactions from other students and parents of students in their schools is incredibly hostile and ill-informed. Both Simone and Paige, despite their young ages, get notes on their lockers calling them a "slut" and a "hoe," presuming that they must be sexually active, demonstrating an ongoing linkage between sex negativity, shame, and HIV/AIDS stigma.

Growing up in the eighties, I understood what I thought of as the homosexual world as potentially life-threatening, not just due to the risk of sexually transmitted diseases like HIV—although this obviously loomed large in my psyche—but also the potential of being exposed to anti-gay violence. However, I was already exposed to violence for my perceived homosexuality every day in my East Bay public school, even before I had admitted it to myself. So, I might as well embrace the danger, right? Under this line of thinking, I assumed that I had no future, so I might as well live like there was no tomorrow.

I remember the first time I went to a gay bar in San Francisco. I was sixteen years old, and my older boyfriend brought me to Club Uranus at the legendary San Francisco gay bar The Endup. In those days, a valid ID could easily get you access to many bars and nightclubs, and I had one on hand (albeit it wasn't mine). When I walked into the club I saw classic, campy drag queens, gender-fuck queens, butch lesbians, femme women that looked like strippers from Mötley Crüe videos, and nearly naked, tattooed punk rock guys dancing with each other. It felt like I was suddenly outside of society, like I was beyond the walls of the last realms of civilization; this was a place of danger, and I loved it.

The apocalyptic atmosphere of the late 1980s and early 1990s queer underground counter-culture was intoxicating. Admitting to myself that I didn't expect to have a long life was liberating. In many ways, this was a hedonistic praxis of No Future, a desire for the liminal, wherein, according to Lee Edelman, "*queerness... figures...the place of the social order's death drive*" (3). As Marke B. writes, discussing San Francisco queer nightlife from 1986-1994, "The message blaring from practically every TV and pulpit during these years was that AIDS was divine punishment. So queer Club Kids dressed up like their patron saint Divine and told the straight world to eat shit" (4).

And yet, praxis of No Future has the potential of delving into the apocalyptic sublime, wherein apocalyptic thinking gives way to an apolitical apathy not so far from complicity with one's oppressors. The anti-social, anti-communitarian strain of queer theory, largely inspired by Leo Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (1987), results in a closed system, in which "the queer" has been made to figure the death drive of society, and identity. According to Halberstam, "Edelman's polemic [*No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*] opens the door to a ferocious articulation of negativity...but, ultimately, he does not fuck the law, big or little L, he succumbs to the law of grammar, the law of logic, the law of abstraction, the law of apolitical formalism, the law of genres" (142). And thus, Edelman's queer negativity falls prey to the epistemological orders he contests. Although Halberstam proposes ways in which the anti-social turn can be seen as indicative of anti-capitalist, anti-fascist, and anti-neoliberal strains in queerness, their work fails to re-contextualize the anti-social turn within an AIDS death world, and abstracts "the queer" into a teleological figure providing a social signifying function. This inevitably results in social reproduction, reifying the conditions of LGBTQ+ stigmatization. Additionally, living for No Future can also enact just that, *no future*, or social and literal death, in the forms of excessive drug use, homelessness, and basic disenfranchisement. Only those already benefiting from systemic privilege can survive this total social rejection. In other words, praxis of No Future walks a thin line between the complicit and the disruptive, and queer negativity rides the fence between self-destructive reification of the social order and effective social transformation. When you are called a faggot before you even know what it means, and when you have a stigmatized identity projected upon you via social abjection, how can you self-author the abject identity you are christened with and still try to survive?

## Abjection

At the culmination of *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva poses the following question; "...who, I ask you, would agree to call himself abject, subject of or subject to abjection?" (209). The underlying supposition of Kristeva's question is that any individual who has been labeled as, or made to feel abject, somehow has the ability to throw off the label, possibly through a behavior modification, and most likely through a therapeutic process of "normalization." However, those made to feel abject must realize that their abjection does not arise from one's self, but is an inherently subjective *projection*; "the abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I" (Kristeva 1). If, as Kristeva describes it, the feeling that arises from facing the abject is "the repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck" (2), what choice does one have who has been labeled as abject but to attempt some sort of modification in order to escape from the label, or to embrace it? <sup>8</sup> For, if I am labeled by another as abject, the problem isn't necessarily mine, but the other's, as "it is...not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 4). The abject troubles epistemological conceptions of the world, which some find troubling, and is therefore rejected.

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<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, those made to feel abject can instigate a form of inversion, in which they construe themselves as "normal" and figure the hegemonic norm as abject. The character Aunt Ida, performed by Edith Massey in John Waters' *Female Trouble* (1979) is an example of this form of inversion. Aunt Ida constantly encourages her nephew to be gay, rather than a homosexual, declaring; "I worry that you'll work in an office, have children, celebrate wedding anniversaries. The world of the heterosexual is a sick and boring life" (Waters *Female Trouble*). For a discussion of the benefits of inversion, see Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, and Samuel R. Delany's "The Tale of Old Venn" in *Tales of Neveryon* (New York: Bantam Books, 1979). And, for a contrary opinion that suggests that inversion does not destabilize hierarchies, but reifies them, see Ranajit Guha's discussion of festivals of inversion in *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

Thus, the abject is what one casts out, and denies any connection to. However, it is not completely separate from one's self, and therefore cannot really be an "object." Rather, the abject is the "objectified-other" that can never completely be severed from the self, creating a tentative and unstable binary that is doomed to collapse—hence the trepidation and uneasiness involved in the feeling of abjection. Additionally, abjection is a structuring force, and the abject is not fixed, but shifts due to the subjective adherence to ideologies and social structures. Helen Hester, building on the work of Mary Douglas, writes; "that which we perceive to be threatening, polluting, or dangerous can be viewed simply as that which cannot be incorporated into the particular systems of classification that we use to order the world" (40).

As noted above, to conceive of something as abject serves two primary purposes, to define one's self and one's society against the abject, and to fortify one's conception of a solid and permanent individuality. And, abjection is the feeling of uneasiness and revulsion that comes over you when faced with the abject. Yet, the repugnance and the turning away involved in the feeling of abjection speak to the deep knowledge of our precarious epistemological constructions; the uneasiness of abjection stems from a realization that the foundations of our conception of self and society are laid upon unstable grounds.

In *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick provides an extended exploration of binaries and how they structure concepts of identity and language, paying particular attention to what she calls "the homo/heterosexual definition" (1). Sedgwick highlights the instability of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, by pointing out that the function of defining one's self as in opposition to an other does not create a balanced binary, but a relationship in which one term is subordinate to the other, and therefore not exterior, as the

binary would assume, but subsumed; i.e. the binaries created by abjection are unstable and destined to collapse into each other. Sedgwick writes;

...categories presented in a culture as symmetrical binary oppositions — heterosexual/homosexual, in this case — actually subsist in a more unsettled and dynamic tacit relation according to which, first, term B is not symmetrical with but subordinated to term A; but, second, the ontologically valorized term A actually depends for its meaning on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of term B; hence, third, the question of priority between the supposed marginal category of each dyad is irresolvably unstable, an instability caused by the fact that term B is constituted as at once internal and external to term A. ( 9-10)

The duplicity that Sedgwick points to here involved in binaries used to define one's self against an "other"—such as live body vs. corpse, male vs. female, heterosexual vs. homosexual, cisgender vs. transgender, normal vs. freak, etc. —is at the core of the uneasiness and revulsion associated with facing the abject. The constitution of the subordinated term as "at once internal and external to term A" (Sedgwick 10) provides for the reinscription and authoring of the phantasmatic abject subject position as a method of widening the circle of inclusion in term A; in other words, for folks exhibiting non-normative gender and sexuality expressions, inhabiting the abject, and performing it, is a way of expanding the possibilities of what is considered human.

When abjection is understood as a response to a troubling of identity, a feeling that results from the dissolution of boundaries and definitions one has thought of as fixed, the connection between the abject and folk who exhibit non-normative gender and sexuality expressions becomes apparent; when one defines the human, and the world, from a heterocentric,



gender binary position, those who trouble this understanding can be disconcerting at best, disgusting and inhuman at worst. For those who have seen the repugnance of abjection in judging eyes, Kristeva's question of "who...would agree to call himself abject [?]" is pointless. A better question would be, what are the implications of performing the abject, taking on the role that has been projected upon one's self? Or, more specifically, what is the cultural significance of an artist who inhabits the abject and speaks from this position for individuals who feel that they live at the border, the in-between?

### Inhabiting the Abject

It is important to remember that abjection is a projection coupled with a response, and as Hester points out, it is not fixed, but subjective. Craig Houser, in "I, Abject," claims; "the position of the abject homosexual is itself a phantasmatic construction" (94). Houser suggests that the abject is not inherently a subject position, but rather offers a locus of identification in which an individual can develop a transgressive subjectivity: "By authoring the subject position of the abject homosexual from within, gays and lesbians are able to problematize, diversify, and resignify the abject position for themselves and others" (99). In this sense, inhabiting the abject can be seen as a performance through which social rejection can be refashioned as deliberate transgression.

Muñoz, in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, explicitly addresses this sort of authoring from within the abject. Muñoz uses the term "phobic object," similar to Kristeva's "phobic hallucination," which is an imaginary object representing a condensation of abject ideals. I use condensation here in the Freudian sense, wherein a single object stands for several ideals. Muñoz uses this example of phobic condensation to show how gender, sexuality, race, class, cultural difference, etc. can be combined in abjection. Muñoz

refers to inhabiting the role of the phobic object, and reinscribing it through performance, writing that “the phobic object, through a campy over-the-top performance, is reconfigured as sexy and glamorous, and not as the pathetic and abject spectacle that it appears to be in the dominant eyes of heteronormative culture” (*Disidentifications* 3). Although Divine (1945-1988), the stage name of Harris Glenn Milstead, is often revered by LGBTQ+ folk, Sedgwick and Michael Moon, in “Divinity: A Dossier, A Performance Piece, A Little-Understood Emotion,” observe: “Divine seems to offer a powerful condensation of some emotional and identity linkages—historically dense ones—between fat women and gay men” (218). Moon’s and Sedgwick’s observation here demonstrates how performing phobic condensation results in an identificatory condensation as well, broadening Divine’s possibility for inspiring affective affinities. Muñoz sees the performance, or authoring of the abject from within, as a method of not only empowering minoritarian positions, but also of illustrating that *the idea of a normative citizen is a phantasmatic construction as well*. He writes, “Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (*Disidentifications* 4). By embracing, performing and authoring the abject from within, individuals made to feel abject by a dominant, racist, heterocentric and cisgender normative regime highlight the frailty of conceptual binaries used to uphold hegemonic constructions of normativity. But it is important to remember, performing the abject is not a haphazard transgression, it is a survival technique. The spoiled identity that is projected onto the abject individual is a shadow of death, and the defiance in disidentificatory practices is inspired by a will to live. Inhabiting and performing the abject is a survival strategy of the minoritarian subject in which one takes agency over what has been projected upon them

and reflects the abject back in a defiant manner. And, queer identification and a queer political formation arises from the shadow of the abject. Sometimes I think time has made us forget that “Queer” is and always was a pejorative that names the abject other, and unifying under the term was a disidentificatory act driven by the will to survive. By performing the abject, one transgresses against the social order that wants to deny a connection to the abject. This is a deliberate transgression, a queer fuck you, a haunting.

## Chapter Introductions

In what follows, I take as my objects literary criticism, fiction, film, and visual and performing arts created or set in the early part of the North American AIDS epidemic (1981-1997). I focus on this period with no intention of claiming that AIDS is over, or that it ended in 1996 with the advent of highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART), or “The Cocktail.” I take to heart the warning of scholars, historians and activists such as Marika Cifor that “framing [AIDS] epidemic commemoration now around only this first fifteen years constricts its subjects again to largely white, middle-class, gay American men” (8). My intention here is not solely “commemoration,” although the cultural transmission of New Narrative writers, and the artist and activist Jerome Caja is assuredly *part* of my intention. Rather, my focus is an analysis of the intertwined nature of AIDS/HIV, abjection, and Queer Identity. Perhaps this choice is all too personal, as the years I have chosen were highly formative for me. I was born in 1975, and came out to friends and began dating men in 1990. In a sense, I came out into AIDS, and I understood my homosexuality as something that exposed me to death. But on the other hand, my first forays into dating men, and going to gay nightclubs, and being in the company of other self-identified LGBTQ+ folk, were joyous for me. But this joy was frenetic and saturated with anger and defiance, and a background of danger. There was certainly a liberatory aspect to life when you

see no future, but I also wanted to live so desperately. Identificatory contradictions are a theme of this project. How do you contest being labeled with a stigmatized identity when you do not really believe in identity? How do you negotiate the family home when only your inauthentic self is welcomed? And how do you transform your abject self into a saint for the queers?

In chapter 1, “The Fiction of Their Personalities,” I lay forth a cultural background to AIDS activism and queer ideologies through an examination of the New Narrative literary movement, a movement which rejected Language Poetry for its inability to represent queer, feminist and other movement-based poets’ subjectivities. Although the founders of the New Narrative movement appreciated the language play of Language Writing, they felt that it did not allow them to express how it felt to live in a society which rejected them for their gender or sexuality. I trace the discourse between these two groups of writers, that is largely reflective of the wider debates surrounding the death of the subject, to show that “Identity” itself was in question at the dawn of a queer political formation. The ambivalence between identity and politics, and its resultant tension, is the foundation of “queer” as a political and analytical category.

In chapter 2, “He’s One of Those People Who Weren’t Invited to This Funeral” I analyze the inauthentic homecomings driven by AIDS, wherein gay men were only partially, if even, welcomed into their families, creating a psychic fracturing in gay male identity. I look at contemporary works using the dawn of the AIDS pandemic as a historical setting to consider how inauthentic homecomings relate to gay identity, and how some narratives, such as Carol Rifka Brunt’s *Tell The Wolves I’m Home* (2012) may perpetuate the idea of the gay male as un-family-like and unwholesome. Following from this, I use Thom Fitzgerald’s 1997 film *The Hanging Garden* to demonstrate what I call the phantasmatic normative child, an image or

phantom of the normative child that a family wishes they had, rather than the homosexual that they reject. The phantasmatic normative child fractures the psyche of the rejected homosexual. And, for many families, their homosexual son dying of AIDS allowed them to mourn for the phantasmatic child while erasing their actual child.

In the three sections of chapter 3, “Jerome Caja’s Abject Ascension” I focus on the artist and performer Jerome Caja. First, “Golden Legend,” analyzes the hagiography that tells the story of Jerome’s life and death due to AIDS related complications, following which he was canonized as Saint Jerome. Second, “(Queer) Canonization” looks at studies of medieval sainthood in order to examine the reverence towards those that died of AIDS, and concludes that saints have always been abject figures. Finally, in “Jerome’s Ascension” I analyze one of Jerome’s final paintings, *The Ascension of the Drag Queen* (1994), and think about Jerome’s ascension into iconicity. Ultimately, I argue that sainthood has always been a demotic urge, and “queer sainthood” is an example of non-institutional sainthood.

And finally, in the “Coda,” I discuss the political campaigns of the drag queen Joan Jett Blakk, who ran for president of the United States in 1992 and 1996. The through line here is identity in an AIDS death world, for those whose identity had become imbricated with AIDS. How was identity shattered, and remade? How did exclusion lead to new social formations? And how did an exposure to death bring about new life models, and queer icons?

Chapter 1: “The Fiction of Their Personalities”: New Narrative and Queer Identity

A Girl is running. *Don't* tell me  
“She’s running for her bus.”

All that aside!  
—“Anti-Short Story,” Rae Armantrout

July 5, 1987

Mina-

Everything’s leaking out—now everyone knows everything. My secrets are getting away from me like crazy, I can’t, I’m getting away. I’m running away. I want an ocean in between where I am and where others’ concept of me exists. I wish I could stay away. And I’m worried about you, And I’m worried about me.

Already gone,

Sam

—Sam D’Allesandro, from *Real: The Letters of Mina Harker and Sam D’Allesandro*

Dodie Bellamy and Sam D’Allesandro’s *Real: The Letters of Mina Harker and Sam*

*D’Allesandro* is a fractured, epistolary text comprised of: correspondence between Bellamy and D’Allesandro from May 15, 1985 to July 5, 1987; a short story by D’Allesandro, “Travels With my Mother,” dictated on tape by Sam two months before his death in 1988 and transcribed by Bellamy in 1994; a reproduction of the program from D’Allesandro’s February 13, 1988 memorial service; and a final, long letter to Sam written by Bellamy nearly five years after his death due to AIDS. Bellamy’s letters are from Mina—as in Mina Harker, the character from Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897)—her alternate personality that loves to gossip about and belittle Dodie. Mina generally addresses her letters to Sam, but sometimes SX, “the little animal inside” of Sam, responds (4). The letters here are part of a larger epistolary project by Bellamy, which also entails *The Letters of Mina Harker*, first published in 1998. The second epigraph above is the last letter from Sam in *Real*, written about six months before his death. In Robert Glück’s “Preface” to *Real*, Glück writes that Bellamy “allowed her correspondents to display the fiction

of their personalities. In other words, it is pure new narrative” (i). New Narrative names a San Francisco based group of writers starting in the late 1970s inspired by Robert Glück and Bruce Boone, and named by Steve Abbott, originally largely centered on a writing group facilitated by Glück at Small Press Traffic, a San Francisco Bay Area Poetry organization and archive. I see New Narrative writing, especially the original cohort, as inextricably tied to the post gay liberation/second wave feminisms and civil rights era of the late 1970s, and the dawn of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in North America.

Generally, New Narrative has been historicized as a response to Language Poetry, the dominant, and valorized (though controversial), field of poetry in the San Francisco Bay Area throughout the 1970s. Language poetry can reductively be characterized as poetry that eschewed the poetic subject/persona in favor of linguistic language games and experiments with sonic and syntactical patterns that place the responsibility of meaning-making on the reader. As an example, here is the first stanza of the poem “Blues for Alice,” by Clark Coolidge;

When you get in on a try you never learn it back  
umpteenth times the tenth part of a featured world  
in black and in back it's roses and fostered nail  
bite rhyme sling slang, a song that teaches without  
travail of the tale, the one you longing live  
and singing burn

Language Writers also sought to denaturalize language by making apparent the arbitrary connection between the sign and the referent. All this was done with an explicit, anti-capitalist politics in mind. Language Writing was inspired by Marxism and linguistics, but also by continental philosophy that questioned the idea of identity as fixed and constant, which, in turn,

caused Language Writers to question narrative for its tendency to construct a cohesive and coherent subject. You can see an example of the rejection of narrative in the first epigraph to this chapter, Rae Armantrout's poem "Anti-Short Story."

New Narrative writers shared much of the same political, theoretical, and philosophical inspirations as Language Writers, but felt that the method of Language poetry was not available to them, as they were movement-based writers grappling with their own sociopolitical oppression, and therefore they needed to communicate their felt experience of living in the world, which relinquishing the speaking subject—and narrative itself—would not allow them to do. So, although many New Narrative writers were originally poets, they turned to prose, autobiography and memoir. My argument here is that the New Narrative writers were indeed responding to Language Writing, but less in a binary *pushback* than through a discursive *relationship* with Language poets in which both groups (and the dividing line here may be broad and ambiguous) were reacting to the politics, culture and philosophy of the times in which they were writing. Additionally, the New Narrative writers were developing their methods in response to the work of homosexual poet Robert Duncan (1919-1988), the punk/avant-garde methods of Kathy Acker (1947-1997), and San Francisco Bay Area feminist poets, such as Judy Grahn, who, like the Language Poets, also sought to confront logocentrism in their work. In other words, New Narrative is not an isolated development, but *part of a larger, leftist political conversation* that goes beyond LGBTQ+ concerns. And, as the San Francisco group of New Narrative writers confronted the onset of the AIDS pandemic in San Francisco, and the accompanying rise in anti-LGBTQ+ violence and social condemnation, the narrative methods they were developing allowed them to explore a queer self-shattering and a sense of *communitas* based on a shared *confrontation* of social rejection. As both the Language Writers and New Narrative writers had a



tendency to discuss how their writing methods were informed by their philosophical attachments and politics, there is an archive of a debate between these two groups that goes beyond their published poetry and prose. This theoretical discourse, rather than literary analysis, is the main focus of this chapter.

As I retrace the discourse between these two groups of writers, those readers familiar with the theoretical debates sometimes labelled as “the death of the subject”—which raged amongst the European and American literati, philosophers and artistic avant-garde from the 1960s through to the 1980s—will see a microcosm of that theoretical/philosophical history. I mean to trace how that larger debate played out in the writing community of the San Francisco Bay Area, with a specific focus on the theoretical/critical work produced by these writers. I do so to develop a theoretical foundation for the Queer Politics—often characterized by ACT UP San Francisco (which split into two separate groups in 1990) and Queer Nation San Francisco, two direct action activist organizations—that had a strong presence in San Francisco in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The methods that the primarily LGBT+ and feminist New Narrative writers were developing were, in many ways, entangled with the early formulations of Queer as a political position. “Queer” as an interpellating banner was meant to both reflect a pejorative construction of stigmatized identities back towards a majoritarian society (defiantly reclaiming the pejorative “Queer” through transgressively self-authoring stigmatized identities) and create a catch-all descriptor under which various groups could unite (counter-hegemony). New Narrative writers, always wary of being called a specific movement, or allowing their methodology to become fixed, continuously deny identity as a constant or concrete thing through their explorations of the self in flux. Additionally, although form is important to New Narrative writers, they use form in

order to express their lived experience in the world through focusing on memoir and autobiographical experimentation. This radical expression of self, in all its contradictions, is political, but it does not require defining a community. On the other hand, a Queer politics necessitated collective action that embraces all the competing and merging vectors of difference intersecting in a field of identity that is in constant motion. A serious question to ask here is how a collective banner such as Queer can avoid the reductive effect of categorization that is compression? Writing on categorical thinking, Bart De Langhe and Philip Fernbach explain the phenomenon of compression; “When you categorize, you think in terms of prototypes. But that makes it easy to forget the multitude of variations that exist within the category you’ve established.” So, what is the characteristic that the prototype of Queer is defined by, and what “variations” on this prototype are erased through the process of categorical thinking? As Cathy J. Cohen pointed out in her article “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” (1997), Queer has reduced its own radical antinormative potential by developing into a binarism focused on one vector of difference, sexuality; Queer ≠ Heterosexual is a different matter than Queer = Standing against regimes of normativity. Cohen writes; “my concern is centered on those individuals who consistently activate only one characteristic of their identity, or a single perspective of consciousness, to organize their politics, rejecting any recognition of the multiple and intersecting systems of power that largely dictate our life chances” (440). Through compression the category of Queer can become unavailable to those that feel unrepresented by its politics. There is a similarity, or rough analogy, here to how New Narrative writers felt about Language Poetry. An exploration of this lack of representation due to compression is the secondary purpose of this chapter.

The connection here is not as arbitrary as it may seem. There is a historical connection between the birth of institutionalized Queer Theory and New Narrative writers as well. Teresa De Lauretis, together with what was then called the Faculty Lesbian and Gay Studies Group, organized what has been narrated as the first Queer Theory conference at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) in 1990. In fact, De Lauretis is credited with coining the term “Queer Theory” to describe this conference. The proceedings were published in a special issue of *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, titled *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities* (Summer 1991, Vol. 3, No. 2). One of the participants in the conference, whose work was included in the special issue of *Differences*, was Earl Jackson Jr. Jackson’s contribution<sup>9</sup> is an analysis of the work of Robert Glück, a founding writer of New Narrative. Jackson explores Glück’s work through feminist theories of embodiment and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Jackson argues that through embodiment, and a focus on the gay male narrative and the gay male act of reading, we can disentangle gay male sexuality from the phallogentric. Jackson claims; “In the construction of gay male identities...the two categories of drives (ego-drives and sexual drives, ego-libido and object-libido, scopophilia and identification) are mutually reinforcing, and narcissism becomes an intersubjective experience” (124). Jackson is rejecting a gay male subjectivity that “emphasize[s] the excessive visibility of a doubly ‘phallic’ encounter” in order to “distinguish gay male sexuality from...the implicit equation of woman as non-meaning, or the not so hidden image of the female body in the heterosexual dynamic as a non-signifying repository for male plentitude” (115, 118). It is as if Jackson, through a Lacanian analysis in

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<sup>9</sup> Earl Jackson Jr., “Scandalous Subjects: Robert Glück’s Embodied Narratives,” *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities*, special issue of *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Summer 1991, pp. 112-134. Another version of this article is included in the chapter “Scandalous Narratives,” which also deals with other writers associated with New Narrative, in Jackson’s book *Strategies of Deviance: Studies in Gay Male Representation*, Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1995.

conjunction with a feminist perspective of embodiment, is trying to liberate the cisgender gay male from complicity in the phallogocentric order in order to engender a collective community between lesbians and gay men. And, Jackson's analysis is compelling. However, according to Cohen, the Queer collective needs to go beyond sexuality; "It is my contention that queer activists who evoke a single-oppression framework misrepresent the distribution of power within and outside of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered communities, and therefore limit the comprehensive and transformational character of queer politics" (441). And yet, as described by Teresa De Lauretis, Jackson's "essay proposes gay sexuality as both a disruptive force and one of communal cohesion and personal identity; the new, post-Stonewall gay narrative, thriving on the social logic of scandal, forges new possibilities of socio-sexual identity and community, and new ways of writing the male body" (xv). This socio-sexual identity proposes one similarity, sexuality, through which a collective can be assembled. But, as Cohen points out, how can that collective then prevent the reproduction of gender, economic and racial hierarchies and unequal power relations that we see in the larger society?

In what follows, I am offering a discursive analysis primarily focused on writers explaining their methods and their political intentions rather than a close reading of the prose/poetry produced in the name of Language Writing and New Narrative. The discourse produced by these writers in conversation with each other is one of politics, theory, positioning, critique, and an explanation of the theory behind their praxis. My intention here is to create an alternative archive of the debate on identity composed of writers thinking about poetic persona and narrative from an LGBTQ+ and feminist perspective. I also want to lay a theoretical groundwork for the period leading up to a Queer political and theoretical formation. And finally, as New Narrative was an object of analysis at the conference at UCSC that is narrated as the

dawn of Queer Theory, I want to look at the critique of subjectless Language Writing analogously with Queer politics' subjectless critique in order to think about the effect of subjectless analysis on Queer Theory and Queer politics' ability to attend to inclusivity and intersectionality. As Eng-Beng Lim and Tavia Nyong'o point out, "subjectless critique was first promulgated to reframe queer studies so that it would not seem determined in advance by its subject or objects but by critique itself...[with the goal of] broadening the scope of queer studies" (151). As you will see, New Narrative writers felt that the subjectless writing of Language poetry results in a categorical collapse, and therefore cannot represent them. Does Queer Theory's subjectless analysis risk the same collapse?

#### Language Writing and New Narrative: Tracing the Discourse

Ron Silliman, in "Language, Realism, Poetry," the introduction to his edited anthology *In the American Tree: Language, Realism, Poetry* (1986) characterizes Language Writing, and the community of Language writers, as engaging each other in a discourse on poetics that responds to a set of issues, namely: "The nature of reality. The nature of the individual. The function of language in the constitution of either realm. The nature of meaning. The substantiality of language. The shape and value of literature itself. The function of method. The relation between writer and reader" (xx). He then goes on to decry the emphasis criticisms of language writing have placed on the critique of reference and syntax in the work of many language writers, as "this critique is itself situated within the larger question of what, in the last part of the twentieth century, it means to be human" (xx). Language Writing itself is a response to poststructuralism and deconstruction, and therefore it has a vested interest in demonstrating the constructed, and arbitrary, nature of language, but also the constructed nature of the individual. Therefore, the poetic voice in lyric poetry, which constructs a persona for the poet, was to be deconstructed and

abandoned. Silliman claims that most criticism directed towards language writing can be characterized as an appeal to persona; "...attacks which have been made on this writing..., make an appeal, explicit or otherwise, to a simple ego psychology in which the poetic text represents not a person, but a persona, the human as unified object. And the reader likewise. This, in turn, is usually called 'communication' or 'emotion'" (xx). Silliman claims that the lack of a unified speaking subject is unsettling for readers. But this unsettling feeling is a goal of Language Writing, which seeks to place the reader in the position of meaning-maker, and also to call into question all systems that have been rendered as commonsensical, such as language and "the human as unified object." The reader is meant to become an active participant in Language poetry through an attempt to subjectively create meaning from the words on paper that may or may not communicate in and of themselves, which in turn creates a feeling of defamiliarization with language itself, causing the reader to reflect on the constructed nature of language. Jackson Mac Low—who finds the terms Language Centered and Non-referential to be lacking in describing the works of those that have been clustered under the banner of Language Writing (some unwillingly)—claims that all writing that has been categorized as thus has one thing in common; "in almost all cases [of Language Writing], in varying degrees, the *perceiver* becomes the center—the *meaning finder*" ("Language Centered," in *In an American Tree*, 475). There is a political dimension here as well. Silliman, writing in *Socialist Review*, claims; "The history of writing is deeply entangled with that of capital. Concepts of grammaticalness, expository order, 'clarity' and 'plain style'—all of which are radically different within or foreign to speaking—organized the written and printed word into a primary tool for an instrumentalist rationalism well-suited for bourgeois reconstruction of the world" ("Poetry and the politics of the subject" *Socialist Review* 61). Here, Silliman is referencing the Saussurean distinction between langue

(written language) and parole (spoken language), but posing that language is a method of capitalist social reproduction—reproducing the conditions in which capitalistic exploitation occurs—while parole, or oral communication, does not *innately* do the same. Steve McCaffery, in his introduction to *The Politics of the Referent*, a collection of essays he edited for *Open Letter* (arising from a symposium on Language Writing), claims that “language-centered, de-referential” writers share “a firm conviction...[in] the intimate interrelation and interdependence of linguistic structure with capitalist structure” (60). McCaffery goes on—thanking Ron Silliman for “his insight”—claiming “that what Marx exposed as the fetishism of commodity is the same mode of mystification that is enacted in the fetishism of the referent, both being instruments for the displacement of human relations into an iconography of commodity” (60). Timothy Kreiner, looking back on Language Writing from the vantage of 2019, writes that McCaffery’s *The Politics of the Referent*, asserts; “Language Writing, in short, is an experimental mode avowedly in line with the values of a working class opposed to the bourgeois ‘I’ of confessional lyrics,” posing the Language poet as providing the reader an opportunity to seize the means of production. Kreiner explains further;

Born from a collective impulse to contest the mainstream of US poetry in the early 1970s, the terms of art by which Language Writing was measured by the mid-1980s gave rise to canonical notions of a *politics of form* centered on the cultural logic of capital. For better or worse, according to that logic, the use of particular formalist techné aligns confessional lyrics with the class interests of the bourgeoisie and experimental formalisms with the aims of the working class.

Kreiner goes on to claim “Forms don’t have politics. People do.” The New Narrative writers would tend to agree.

Bruce Boone, responding to *Hills 6/7*, a special issue titled *Talks*, published in 1980 (which compiled pieces from the “Talks” series hosted around San Francisco, beginning in 1977) does not object to Language Writing in general, but does reject the idea that language writing is somehow innately political, and narrative writing is not. Boone, discussing Ron Silliman’s essay in the collection, “The New Sentence,” claims that Silliman “is advising a clean break with [the referential world], a world of meaning, the world of emotions, the world of cause and effect. In short, with everything but the world of language considered formally” (118). Boone identifies this as inspiring much of the “antagonism” against Language Writing. Boone here is not only considering his own response to Language Writing, but also pulling from letters written to *Poetry Flash* expressing criticisms of/issues with Language Writing from various perspectives. Boone claims; “If you take away people’s emotions, their ability to tell stories and their capability to deal generally with the outside world, you are not really going to have much of an appeal to several significant groups. Blacks, Latins and other racial minorities for instance. Most feminists and politically oriented gay men for instance. And in all likelihood political people generally” (118). Boone goes on to say that “it seems quite unlikely, for instance, that a person could deal adequately with racism, or oppression based on class or realities of prison life, say, in a formalist language” (119). Ultimately, although Boone admires Language Writing, he does not see it as a vehicle for movement-based writers. Boone sums up his feelings;

I’m not sure whether I see signs of change in all this or not. I would certainly like to, since I consider Language Poetry one of the significant developments of our time. So much real thought has gone into it, so much concern and insight into the commodified conditions of language in our everyday life. Some of it is even poetry that I like a great deal—Bob Perelman’s. And Silliman’s critical prose would be hard to match for intelligence and a sense of commitment to social change. But still, I need something more than this. I need a literature that will help bring on social change. (119).



Boone shows interest in the theory and method of Language Writing, but feels that it does not allow for the expression of sociocultural oppression/exploitation, racism, misogyny and homophobia as felt experiences in the world. And, although the intention behind Language Writing theoretically addresses class-based oppression, Boone, even in his admiration and enjoyment of the theory and method, does not see the potential for social change in Language Writing.

Silliman is aware of the unavailability of Language Writing for those whose daily lived experience in the world is part of their politics. In the *Socialist Review*, he writes;

“Progressive poets who identify as members of groups that have been the subject of history—many white male heterosexuals, for example—are apt to challenge all that is supposedly ‘natural’ about the formation of their own subjectivity. That their writing today is apt to call into question, if not actually explode, such conventions as narrative, persona and even reference can hardly be surprising. At the other end of this spectrum are poets who do *not* identify as members of groups that have been the subject of history, for they instead have been its objects. The narrative of history has led not to their self-actualization, but to their exclusion and domination. These writers and readers—women, people of color, sexual minorities, the entire spectrum of the ‘marginal’—have a manifest political need to *have their stories told*. That their writing should often appear much more conventional, with the notable difference as to whom is the subject of these conventions, illuminates the relationship between form and audience. It also illustrates why any prescription for a ‘correct’ aesthetic program (socialist realism comes to mind), not unlike the Great Books and ‘cultural literacy’ movements, can only homogenize and suppress real social difference.” (63)

Here, Silliman suggests that capitalist social reproduction = language = narrative, but, modernist forms of nonreference and the elimination of the speaking subject break down capitalist social reproduction. However, Silliman also admits that the modernist methods of Language Writing

are only really available to those that have been the subject of history—heterosexual (and I would add cisgender) white men. First, this does ignore the presence of several well-known and successful female-identified Language Writers, such as Lyn Hejinian, Jean Day, and Carla Harryman, just to name a few. But, if the formalist method of Language Writing is mostly available to cisgender white male heterosexuals, or those that are willing to lay aside other vectors of oppression and focus merely on a class-based politics, what kind of change does Language Writing really offer? Additionally, if this “illuminates the relationship between form and audience,” it also suggests that Language Writing, with its disappearing subject, would be appropriate for an audience that mirrors its writers, heterosexual, white, and cisgender. With the political goals of disrupting capitalist social reproduction, this limited pool of writers and readers seems to fundamentally misunderstand the practicalities of economic class and its relationship to systemic policies of disenfranchisement and generational wealth in the United States (which are inarguably tied to race, gender and sexuality). Additionally, if Silliman recognizes that cisgender white male heterosexuals have been the “Subject” of history, while others have often found themselves as the “Object” of history, it would seem to be the responsibility of politically minded cisgender white male heterosexuals to trouble their rendering as the normative subject of history by speaking towards the particularities of their subject position rather than reifying the rendering of their particularity as the universal experience. I am inclined to agree with Boone here, that I admire the theory, the rigor and the method of the Language poets, and I enjoy reading the poetry and theory composed in the name of Language Writing, but I want to see a praxis of political poetry grounded in context. The problem here is actually not one of form, because as I have said I appreciate Language poetry for its formal experimentation, but the problem lies within Language writers’ tendency toward polemical self-promotion of their

theoretical stance and ideology, and its relationship to their chosen formal experiments, as a political resistance movement that in turn devalues other forms of writing. Additionally, a politics focused on one vector of oppression, economic class, is bound to elide other vectors of oppression, which, in the end, only benefits those that are *only* experiencing class-based oppression. As the Combahee River Collective wrote in 1977, “the major systems of oppression are interlocking,” and, as Black Feminists, they “find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in [their] lives they are most often experienced simultaneously” (234, 237).

Robert Glück wrote of the allure of Language Writing, while it also felt unavailable to him as a working-class gay man, claiming; “If I could have become a Language poet I would have; I craved the formalist fireworks, a purity that invented its own tenets” (“Long Note on New Narrative,” in *Communal Nude*, 14). But, Glück goes on to observe;

“I experienced the poetry of disjunction as a luxurious idealism in which the speaking subject rejects the confines of representation and disappears in the largest freedom, that of language itself. My attraction to this freedom, and to the professionalism that purveyed it, made for a kind of class struggle within myself. Whole areas of my experience, especially gay experience, were not admitted to this utopia. The mainstream reflected a resoundingly coherent image of myself back to me—an image so unjust that it amounted to a tyranny that I could not turn my back on. We had been disastrously described by the mainstream—a naming whose most extreme (though not uncommon) expression was physical violence. Combating this injustice required at least a provisionally stable identity. (*Communal Nude*, 14-15)

Thus, despite the disbelief in stable identity, politically an at least “provisionally stable identity” would need to be deployed. One could consider this a strategic essentialism; however, what Glück is posing here is not an essentialist understanding of self, but rather a self-authoring of the

image that has been reflected upon you. This is a rotoscopic<sup>10</sup> self-authoring in which you animate the stereotypical image projected upon you. So, how could this be done? The methods of New Narrative, and the practice of the New Narrative writers, was not an absolute rejection of Language Writing, nor was it an adversarial, reactionary or oppositional relationship between the two groups. Even though the New Narrative writers did not feel represented by Language Writing, the relationship would be better described as collaborative, coupled with lively disagreement. Glück writes; “We contended with the Language poets while seeking their attention in the forums they erected for themselves. We published articles in *Poetics Journal* and *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, and spoke in talk series and forums—a mere trickle in the torrent of their critical work. If Language Poetry was a dead end, what a fertile one it proved to be!” (*Communal Nude* 18). In fact, Silliman, in his introduction to *In the American Tree*, writes; “there are literally dozens of other poets and writers whose work has both influenced and been influenced by the debate reflected in these pages [and] a volume of absolutely comparable worth could be constructed from [their] writing” (xxi). Silliman then lists several poets/writers, with Robert Glück and Bruce Boone near the top of the list. This allure coupled with a rejection is similar to how Kathy Acker, one of the inspirations for the New Narrative writers (and often grouped with them), responded to Language poetry.

Acker had long histories of correspondence with many of the Language poets, especially Jackson Mac Low and Ron Silliman. When Silliman’s poetry collection *Chinese Notebook* was released, Acker responded to him; “by the way, how do I ‘experience language directly’? I’ll be damned if I can ever separate language from my use of it from my perceiving/desires... You’re

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<sup>10</sup> By “rotoscopic” here I am referring to an experimental form of animation in which a photographic or filmic image is projected and then traced to become animation. I use this term to denote the agency of self authoring despite having a stigmatic identity projected upon one’s self. Through rotoscopic self-animating, a stigmatic image is transformed, although its shadow is still present under the surface.

dealing with language in [*Chinese Notebook*] only in a certain way... How would you write a section of [*Chinese Notebook*] after fucking for 5 hours? After long yoga session?" However, she ends her note with a postscript, stating "I think *Chinese Notebook* has made me fall in love with you" (Acker, qtd in Kraus 121). Although Acker rejects the method for eliminating subjectivity, narrative, and the voice of the poet, she is drawn in enough to declare her possible love. Camille Roy, a foundational New Narrative poet/writer, writes of this period of exchange between Language poets and New Narrative writers; "I arrived in the [San Francisco] Bay Area during the Language Poetry Wars of the eighties, and what I observed during those years was the birth of a discourse" (*Biting the Error*, 8). Discourse is an apt description, as New Narrative writers cast the relationship as fruitful, despite Language Writing's disdain of narrative form; "Language poetry was indeed built on the discredit of narrative and New Narrative was to be built on a complex combination of alliance with and interrogation of Language poetry's basic tenets" (Bellamy and Killian, *Writers Who Love Too Much*, viii). Even in embracing, and arguing for, what had been rejected outright by Language poets—i.e., narrative and the speaking subject—that opposition was formative.

### The Fractured, Conflicted Self

When analyzing how New Narrative writers approached their writing method, it is obvious that they shared similar concerns and goals with Language Writing but developed a different approach. Kevin Killian and Dodie Bellamy, in the introduction to *Writers Who Love Too Much: New Narrative 1977-1997*, write:

The question was how to reproduce the sensations of ordinary life while subverting the totalizing narrative that had stymied and withered our lives, and had reduced the world to a patchwork quilt of colored squares on a globe. Narrative was basically corrupt, or so we gathered from our attendance at the readings of Language poets, and absolute narrative

corrupts absolutely, and so the stratagems of all the modernisms were dangled in front of us with a take it and try it on shrug. (ix)

Much like the Language poets, Killian and Bellamy demonstrate their disdain, or distrust, of a totalizing narrative that renders the perception of the writer as an immutable, fixed persona. The fractured self and distrust of cohesive narrative expressed by the Language Writers and New Narrative writers was inspired by debates about the “death of the subject” but also, more generally, by writers, artists and their experiences of living in the world of the late 1970s and 1980s in the United States.<sup>11</sup> For example, an early influence for Kathy Acker was the multimedia artist Bernadette Mayer’s installation *Memory* (1972), comprised of photographic images of one year of her life, coupled with narration in which she tried to remember each day of the year, ultimately demonstrating the inconsistency of the self (Kraus 62). Feeling that they needed to express their fractured identity as beings living in the world, New Narrative writers turned towards autobiography/memoir; “We were thinking about autobiography. By autobiography, we meant daydreams, nightdreams, the act of writing, the relationship to the reader, the meeting of flesh and culture; the self as collaboration, the self as disintegration, the gaps, inconsistencies, and distortions of the self; the enjambments of power, family, history, and language” (Glück, *Communal Nude*, 18). This fractured sense of identity was meant to express how the New Narrative writers experienced themselves in the world at the end of the 1970s and the dawn of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Glück writes; “I wanted to write with a total continuity and total disjunction since I experienced the world (and myself) as continuous and infinity divided” (*Communal Nude*, 18).

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<sup>11</sup> In “Long Note on New Narrative” Glück lists the thinkers he and Boone were reading.

With this in mind, Glück and Boone decided on an autobiographic method of text-metatext. According to Glück, “The metatext cuts naturalistic illusion. It includes the reader, it asks questions, asks for critical responses, makes claims on the reader, elicits comments. In any case, text-metatext takes its form from the dialectical cleft between real life and life as it wants to be” (Glück, “Caricature,” in *Communal Nude*, 94). Glück and Boone argue that the method of text-metatext can communicate the instability of identity, while also allowing the reader to constantly shift from passive recipient of narrative to active participant, placing some of the meaning making in the hands of the reader, much like Language Writing’s critique of reference. Just past the halfway mark of *Jack the Modernist*, a novel that largely focuses on a failed relationship between the narrator Bob, and the eponymous Jack, Glück includes a chapter titled “Envoi,” which is in the form of a letter addressed to the “Ladies and Gentlemen of the Future” (101). Glück begins the letter, “greetings from late capitalism where meaning and image have come apart....Is there going to be a future? Tell me” (101). Later in the letter, Glück writes, “believing in a future would mean so much to Jack and me in our lovemaking, and to my friends and the writers in my workshop, you have no idea. At worst it would make Jack’s reserve easier to bear, not to mention the melting ice-cap, the ruined ozone layer, nuclear proliferation, the pouted oceans and the corresponding rallies and marches” (103). “Envoi” places the reader as outside looking in, from some point in a possible future, which causes a defamiliarization that, in turn, makes us aware of our reader response. As a reader, this moment makes me aware of Bob, as Robert Glück, living in a tumultuous world that feels cataclysmic. My first time reading *Jack the Modernist* I wondered why Bob was so invested in Jack when it is obvious to the reader that they are not a couple that is meant to be together for any long duration, but this metatextual interruption in the narrative that is “Envoi” brought me to consider the moments between and

around the narrative interludes of Bob and Jack's relationship, considering the world they were living in, and the world that I myself am living in. Boone writes; "It is to...the question of the location of the subject actually speaking these poems and stories that we should now turn our attention—to locate, that is, that offstage 'elsewhere,' whose region, insofar as it constitutes conditions of reality, can now be called political rather than psychological. For it is only out of social conditions that the narrating imagination comes to be" (20). In this space between text and metatext is where I, as a reader, feel an intimacy, or connection with Glück. These moments take me out of a spectatorial, or passive recipient, relationship with the narrator as other to an understanding of Glück, and myself, as both subjects in the world. The New Narrative writers' formal experimentations with narrative make the reader aware that they have been drawn into what Gabriele Schwab calls the "transitional space" of literature. Schwab claims; "If we understand reading as a negotiation across cultural and historical boundaries and a form of making contact with otherness, then we perceive a double movement toward the culture of the text/play and back toward the culture of the reader" (4). Fracturing the narrative of experimental memoir with a text metatext can help the reader become more consciously aware of this interplay between themselves and the subjectivity of the author/narrator.

The idea of a stable identity, or an inflexible poetic persona, being a fiction, but the hope that something of the self could be embedded deep within the fractured identities expressed in New Narrative is inspired by the homosexual poet Robert Duncan, an influence, and elder icon, of the New Narrative writers, particularly Glück. In editing a volume of his early poems from 1939-1946, Duncan, writing in 1966, observes "The Structure of my life like the structure of my work was to emerge in a series of trials, a problematic identity. A magpie's nest or a collage, a construct of disparate elements drawn into the play they have exited, a syncretic religion" (ii).



Duncan contextualizes his poems historically, both politically and personally, in that he identifies his influences at the times that the poems were written. Duncan explicitly tells the reader who he was reading and whom influenced him when writing specific poems, coupling this with autobiographical notes about his life at the time (where he was, whom he was socializing with, what he was doing, his philosophical and political associations, etc.). Duncan's varying styles and poetic explorations led Charles Olson to call his work imbalanced, and describe him as overly-influenced by others in an essay titled "Against Wisdom as Such."<sup>12</sup> Duncan quotes from him in his introduction, and responds "the accusation of falseness, of literary passions and exaggerated pretensions, bit deep. I seemed to have no authenticity; my most moving poems were not mine at all but sprang from the origins of George Barker or Saint-John Perse, Lorca or Milton or Laura Riding" (x). However, rather than attempt to edit together a cohesive collection or revise his earlier work to disprove the claim, Duncan leans into the critique, declaring;

"What has happened in the almost two decades since *Heavenly City, Earthly City* was written, is that I have come not to resolve or to eliminate any of the old conflicting elements of my work but to imagine them now as contrasts of a field of composition in which I develop an ever-shifting possibility of the poet I am—at once a made up thing and at the same time a depth in which my being is—the poems not ends in themselves but forms arising from the final intention of the whole in which they have their form and in turn giving rise anew to that intention. Poems then are immediate presentations of the intention of the whole, the great poem of all poems, a unity, and in any two of its elements or parts appearing as a duality or a mating, each part in every other having, if we could see it, its condition—its opposite or contender and its satisfaction or twin. Yet in the composite of all members we see no duality but the variety of the one." (x)

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<sup>12</sup> This essay is reprinted in Charles Olson, *Collected Prose*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

According to Robin Tremblay-McGaw, “the ‘field of composition’ underscores the constructed, the made, material, artifactual nature of the poet—‘his being’—and the poems themselves.”

Tremblay-McGaw argues that Glück’s recurring citation of Duncan’s quote—“at once a made up thing and at the same time a depth in which my being is”—enacts a “queer belonging.” “Glück and Boone’s conception of the Berkeley Renaissance group as a ‘gay band,’ Boone’s scholarly writing on Duncan, Spicer, and Blaser, Glück’s frequent weaving of Duncan’s phrase at once ‘a made up thing and at the same time a depth in which my being is’ constitute an engaged practice and set of relations; that is, they enact, make material, via collage, appropriation, and pastiche, queer belongings” (TremblayMcGaw). The fluidity, and fractured nature of the self were not only theoretically inspired. Although Glück and Boone were reading Foucault and others, and embraced social construction over essentialism, the idea of the fractured self as well as the idea that identity is collaborative and transactional, came from the community of avant-garde, feminist and LGBT+ writers and artists to whom the New Narrative writers were exposed. But it also came from continental theory. Epistemological shifts can, in other words, arise from praxis as much as theory, and we all have varying archives to pull from that sometimes reflect a larger theoretical/philosophical *zeitgeist*.

Responding to Language Writing’s method of highlighting the connection between sign and referent in order to destabilize it, New Narrative writers turn towards semiotics. It’s not just the written sign that grasps onto a referent, but all objects accrue semiotic meaning. In “Safety,” Robert Glück writes;

“I hobbled to the kitchen and sat trembling. This is certainly the safest room and also the most false, I thought, because everything refers to the past, quoting and quoting. The copper pots mean Country French, the white curtains are Victorian shifts of muslin, the

pine table means the Old West, the head of cabbage means the Great Depression, the framed Holstein is a borrowed agrarian childhood and so on” (“Safety”, *Elements of a Coffee Service*, 18)

The referents are capitalized, giving the connotations conjured by these objects more weight than the objects themselves. The links of meaning are omnipresent, making this room feel both safe and false. The layered referentiality of the kitchen disturbs in its citational falsity, but the cultural and symbolic weight behind each item also comforts. There is a destabilization of logocentrism here. In the accrual of meaning, concrete and definite meaning is lost, and meaning becomes indefinite and fluid, arbitrary, and based on subjectivity. Confronting logocentrism is a writing trait that new Narrative receives from Judy Grahn and other feminist Bay Area poets. Abbott, writing on Grahn’s “A Woman is Talking to Death” (1974) claims, “what’s on trial is logocentrism” (42).

There is also a gossipy feeling to New Narrative. Glück writes; “We brought gossip and anecdote to our writing because they contain speaker and audience, establish the parameters of community, and trumpet their ‘unfair’ points of view” (*Communal Nude*, 23). Writers included the real names of their friends, loved ones, and casual sex partners as if the reader already knew them. This localized language extends to naming bars, events, and locations that would have been known to the writers’ circle of friends, as if the reader is an insider. According to Abbot, an effect of using real names and localized language is that “the writer/artist becomes exposed and vulnerable: you risk being foolish, mean-spirited, wrong. But if the writer’s life is more open to judgment and speculation, so is the reader’s” (42). The intimacy of personal, localized language coupled with the formula of text-metatext—which often entailed direct questions for the reader—couples New Narratives fractured narrative/self with a *sense* of community.

## *Communitas* of New Narrative

As mentioned above, part of the reason Glück felt that he could not become a Language poet is his homosexuality. As a gay man, he claimed that there was a “resoundingly coherent image” of the gay man that was “reflected” back onto him by “the mainstream” (*Communal Nude*, 14-15). Part of this “naming” included violence, or gay bashings. The risk of violence for gay men is addressed in Glück’s writings, such as in the first story in *Elements of a Coffee Service*, titled “Sanchez and Day.” The story tells of an attempted gay bashing while Glück is walking his dog. Four men in a passing truck yell “Faggot” and “Fucking Faggot” at Glück as he walks down the street. Glück responds; “I had been in a happy mood and with the last of my ebullience I gave them the finger, which I instantly regretted because the truck screeched to a stop and lurched into a three-point turn” (*Elements of a Coffee Service*, 1). The rest of the story tells of their pursuit, and Glück’s use of local knowledge to evade his pursuers (he knows where there is an empty lot, and where there are holes in the fence). Finally, he goes inside a local corner store. He tells the reader that the truck, in pursuit of him, crashes into a light pole. The man he had first noticed in the truck, because he found him attractive (it was probably the desiring look of the homosexual that ‘outed’ him in the first place), “was holding his hands in front of a mess of blood on his face” (*Elements*, 4). Then Glück tells us that although “that makes for a satisfying if frivolous ending,” it’s not really what happened (*Elements*, 4). What actually happened is that “the men and the truck disappeared except from my imagination” (*Elements*, 4). Glück ends the story with the following;

I had angry dreams. Even in my erotic fantasies I couldn’t banish a violence that twisted the plot away from pleasure to confusion and fear. And what I resolved was this: that I would gear my writing to tell you about incidents like the one at Sanchez and Day, to put

them to you as real questions that need answers, and that these questions, along with my understanding and my practice, would grow more energetic and precise. (4)

Bellamy and Killian refer to this story as “a sort of manifesto for New Narrative” (*Writers Who Love...*, viii). Through labeling him a “faggot,” Glück is rendered as abject, and someone to pursue on the street and expose to physical violence. This experience of abjection is mixed up with his self-perception and erotics. This space of abjection is what he proposes to express and question in his work. Not just through content, but through theory—“my understanding”—and method—“my practice.” Glück, in his “Long Note on New Narrative,” lists the theorists, philosophers and critics that directly inspired New Narrative, in which he explicitly cites Julia Kristeva, “for elaborating the meaning of Abjection” (21). The feeling of being cast out, yet still constituted from within by those who reject him is the result of being made to feel abject. Along with sharing gossip and scandal, the shared feeling of being abjected was a major unifying force amongst New Narrative writers, and part of the interpellating draw of Queer as a political and identity formation. We must remember that at the dawn of a queer political formation, queer was still an active slur, a pejorative hurled with an abjecting force. And, claiming and resignifying that pejorative was a defiant act of refusal of otherness and powerlessness, and a refusal to hide. As Queer Nation would chant, “we’re here, we’re queer, get used to it,” and “we’re here, we’re queer, and so are some of you.” This is the core of the communal nature of New Narrative and its cohort. Abbott says that New Narrative writing is not pre-supposing “community” in the classical sense; “do we really want community again, in the same way, with all of its nostalgia and repressiveness[?]” (45). So perhaps part of the effect of New Narrative, both writing and reading it, was to create a *communitas* of disintegration and abjection.

In *Jack the Modernist*, Glück narrates a night at the baths, and anonymous group sex. Of viewing group sex, Glück writes; “we watch the pleasure rather than the men, feeling the potential interchangeability” (54). As Glück is fucked from behind, while another man masturbates him, and others lick his nipples and kiss him, spectators masturbate themselves; “Although they masturbated themselves to obtain immediate knowledge of my excitement, it was as spectators that they solemnly shared in what my pleasure revealed” (*Jack*, 54). As he nears orgasm, Glück declares’ “I, my identity, was more and more my body so I/it cried out with each released breath, not to express myself but as a by-product of physical absorption” (*Jack*, 54-55). After his orgasm, Glück observes;

Getting fucked and masturbated produces an orgasm that can be read two ways, like the painting of a Victorian woman with her sensual hair piled up who gazes into the mirror of her vanity table. Then the same lights and darks reveal a different set of contours: her head becomes one eye, the reflection of her face another eye and her mirror becomes the dome of a grinning skull/woman/skull/woman/skull—I wanted my orgasm to fall between those images. *That’s not really a place*. I know. The pious Victorian named his visual pun ‘Vanity.’ I rename it ‘Identity.’ I relinquished the firm barrier that separated us—no, that separated me from nothing. I might have liked to shoot far for boundlessness but when I get fucked in the ass that rarely happens, it just spills.<sup>13</sup> (*Jack*, 55)

Glück refers to the feeling of existing within that space between one’s self and the other, or self and nothing, within that moment of disintegration as “excited neutrality”; “you feel it in the space between image and meaning: an invented place but isn’t heaven?—the future?” (*Jack* 102). Abbott characterizes “excited neutrality” as “the space we occupy between boundaries. On one side there’s sensation, ecstasy, pre-language; on the other, identity, future, narrativity. The self

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<sup>13</sup> The “painting” Glück is referring to, actually a drawing, is C. Allen Gilbert’s “All is Vanity” (1892).

hovers precariously in between” (50). In what sense is this space of excited neutrality similar to the space of abjection? The excited neutrality comes at that moment between being the pursued “faggot” who will be beaten on the street, and shopping for strawberries in the store where he hid from his pursuers. While shopping, and looking out for his pursuers, Glück notices the country music playing in the store, and realizes that he cannot identify with the song although he enjoys it. He cannot identify because of a difference, that difference being that “walking on 29<sup>th</sup> a bunch of men in a truck yelled ‘faggot’ at me” (*Elements*, 3-4). But, Glück is also in the space of excited neutrality as he is fucked and masturbated while gazing at the spectators who “masturbated themselves to obtain immediate knowledge of [his] excitement.” Perhaps excited neutrality is just *jouissance* going by a different name? But that feeling of being cast out from one’s self, either through pleasure or abjection, and the *space* between one’s self and nothing, the space in which we fluctuate between subjectivation and desubjectivation, is always contextualized in New Narrative. Abjection is culturally and historically specific, and the feeling of disintegration that establishes a *communitas* for the New Narrative writers is entwined with the late 1970s afterglow of Gay Liberation, Feminisms and Civil Rights, and the dawn of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Remember, part of the intention of New Narrative is to express “the self as disintegration” through autobiography (Glück 18). The responses here to the breaking down of identity, the future, and narrativity are all culturally specific and subjective, even though that subjectivity is deeply fractured and disintegrating. As Abbott writes; “The war of ideologies, of diverse experience, or past and present, of desire and obsession not only complicates everything; it IS everything” (50).

On the other side of “the self as disintegration” is “the self as collaboration” (18). Not only did the writers attend workshops, parties and events together, they collaborated in

composition. And, due to the AIDS epidemic flourishing in San Francisco at this time, these moments of collaboration were often surrounded, and necessitated, by death. The writers cited and appropriated (sometimes plagiarized) from each other, gossiped about each other, and shared each other's secrets, breaking down the boundaries between themselves. Killian and Bellamy write of Abbott; "Collaboration could also be employed to relieve the anxieties of a comrade. Steve Abbott, his energies flagging under the siege of AIDS, turned to his friends and asked them to write a chapter of his last published novel, *The Lizard Club*" (Bellamy and Killian, *Writers Who Love...*, xiii). And, "When Sam D'Allesandro grew too weak to sit up and write, he dictated his stories into a tape recorder, leaving it to others to rewind and transcribe, to find the words between the long labored gasps and clicks his throat made" (Bellamy and Killian, *Writers Who Love...*, xiii). These shared moments of collaboration become productive through a *communitas* of abjection and mourning.

Maxe Crandall, reflecting on New Narrative, declares "New Narrative is actually about communal absence: the collectives formed through loss and the creative forms created in those collectives." Crandall goes on;

my attachment to New Narrative is also a form of grieving. Its form is necessarily one determined by death and the fight for a city. "New Narrative writing today" still functions primarily as a methodology for mourning. Inside of this, the practices of New Narrative help me consider how influence makes and unmakes me, about that sometimes-need to crawl into influence as a mode of survival.

Crandall points to the communal absence in the aftermath of the dawn of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the San Francisco Bay Area, where AIDS has taken a marked toll, particularly in those early years. But, Crandall also points to the comfort of influence, wherein the boundaries between one's self and those that have influenced you are ambiguous. This "methodology of



mourning...makes and unmakes” you, but Crandall renders this as a comfort, something to “crawl into.”

Upon reflecting back on New Narrative, from my vantage point of 2023, the lack of racial accounting in New Narrative is glaring. Jean-Thomas Tremblay discusses “Impersonality’s communal promise” in New Narrative, which he relates to Leo Bersani’s “Self Shattering,” and Samuel R. Delany’s ideas about “Contact.”<sup>14</sup> Although New Narrative contended with Language Writing’s privileging of the cisgender, white heterosexual male by responding with a feminist, queer, and often working-class voice, there is little discussion of race. The first group of New Narrative writers tended to be gay, lesbian, feminist, and white (with noted exceptions such as R. Zamora Linmark, Gabrielle Davis, and Gloria Anzaldúa who was associated with New Narrative, attended Glück’s writing workshop, and taught her own writing workshop at Small Press Traffic). However, subsequent cohorts of New Narrative writers have become more diverse. And yet, the disappearance of race coupled with the explicit discussion of misogyny and homophobia from the collaborative and intertextual work of the first New Narrative writers, particularly when you relate the New Narrative movement to a dawn of Queer identity, creates a unified Queer subjectivity that is decidedly white. Tremblay postulates that the method of appropriation embraced by New Narrative perhaps alienates racially diverse writers. The lack of attending to how racialized minorities perceive appropriation compromises New Narrative goals of inclusivity. “The reticence to theorize appropriation in racial and cultural terms signals one area where New Narrative deviates from its own agenda,” writes Tremblay. Nevertheless, at that moment in time, the way New Narrative responded to and engaged in a discourse with Language Writing did create community, and showed that form, without subjectivity, tends to create a

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<sup>14</sup> See Bersani’s “Is the Rectum a Grave?” and Delany’s *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*.

homogenous Subject. But then again, with the solipsistic nature of New Narrative, and the focus on LGBTQ+ and feminist concerns, does the method and form allow for critical attention to intersectional concerns? I do not think New Narrative structurally precludes racial concerns, rather New Narrative reflects how predominantly white the queer community was at this historical moment. I will allow Abbott to end this section;

New Narrative marks an emotional moving forward. What Grahn and her feminist precursors Pat Parker, Alta and Sharon Isabell do in writing, graffitiists do in painting: traditional subject/object boundaries blur. New Narrative shatters linearity, proceeds by flashes, enigmas, and yields to a florid crying-out theme of suffering/horror—in short, to a future. Formalisms implode, stagnate. New Narrative explodes, speaking to and creating community. Where New Narrative parts with the older literature of the abject (Celine, Kafka, etc) is in its communal; and political grounding. (42)

## Conclusion

What I have been trying to communicate here—in addition to my point that New Narrative is more than a *response* to Language Writing—is that LGBT+ and Feminist groups of writers and artists were contending with the fractured self, and a distrust of identity, even extending to sexual identity, but still needed to respond to othering discourses that projected stereotypical identities onto them, and this actively inspired New Narrative. Similarly, with the emergence of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, when homophobic public discourse and violence accelerated—which had died down to some degree in the Gay Liberation 1970s—collective action became necessary. Just as the New Narrative writers felt that they could not let go of their subjectivity due to the oppression they felt in their daily lives, LGBT+ folk felt the need to unite under an “at least ... provisionally stable identity”; Queer. And yet, this provisional identity was meant to be tactical, and not to cohere into a reductive, exclusionary identity, which,

counterintuitively, has inspired constant attempts to define and theorize what queer means. As Cathy J. Cohen writes;

Through its conception of a wide continuum of sexual possibilities, queer theory stands in direct contrast to the normalizing tendencies of hegemonic sexuality rooted in ideas of static, stable sexual identities and behaviors. In queer theorizing the sexual subject is understood to be constructed and contained by multiple practices of categorization and regulation that systematically marginalize and oppress those subjects thereby defined as deviant and 'other.' And, at its best, queer theory focuses on and makes central not only the socially constructed nature of sexuality and sexual categories, but also the varying degrees and multiple sites of power distributed within all categories of sexuality, including the normative category of heterosexuality. (438-439)

However, when the category of Queer collapses into meaning “not heterosexual,” it loses its political efficacy for all but those who only experience oppression based on one vector of difference, sexuality. New Narrative can retain a certain heterogeneity through its tendency towards solipsistic examination of lived experience which highlights individual particularities. But, an ambivalent relationship to identity creates a faulty foundation for queer collectivism, as “collect” suggests bringing together into a group, and a group is often understood through its similarities.

I am not advocating a reuptake of New Narrative as a mode of political writing in this moment. Any effectively political avant-garde literature of the moment would need at the least to address racial difference, environmentalism, decolonization, and contemporary gender politics explicitly, and I am not sure that the extreme individualism of New Narrative *as it was* can do that. Trisha Low, writing about a conference on New Narrative in 2017, writes;

The truth is, I don't believe that New Narrative as a set of practices, or as a community of writers, can be divorced from its historical context — the '70s gay rights movements, the '80s AIDS crisis, the landscape of a very different Bay Area. As Ariel Goldberg notes in *The Estrangement Principle*, even if you, an empathetic young person, wear a SILENCE = DEATH t-shirt, it doesn't mean you understand that moment — in fact, you probably never will. But perhaps what we can take from New Narrative is the way it insisted on making art that was, either directly or obliquely, a part of the activism in that political moment. An important part of that was imagining, and writing, and living something instead of the doom they faced — something they desired, something *different*. Indeed, it would be silly to love New Narrative so much that we would want to reproduce it exactly, or (impossibly) try to emulate the conditions that produced it — and if we did, it would likely be some flimsy facsimile. But perhaps we can reformulate its methods, perhaps we can strive to form a relationship to our art that interacts with our current moment in the way that New Narrative authors did with theirs. Why be nostalgic to suffer the past when there is so much to face in the Bay Area of 2017, where the landscape has begun to literally burn? (Low "Views of the Same Light")

So, what am I advocating? Well, I would say that above all I am advocating for troubling what is cast as commonsensical, and not allowing an opposition to become a binarism. Queer politics' inability to properly maintain an intersectional activism emerges from a concretization of identity in that queer came to mean not heterosexual, or not normal, rather than the strategic deployment of a provisional category. An understanding of "Queer" when it was still living in the shadow of the pejorative was relational, and defiant. And yet, as an object of analysis that becomes

unmoored from context, “Queer” becomes structural and reproduces the conditions of its inception through looking for a telos rather than devising strategies to survive.

I synthesized Juxtaposed the discourse of the Language writers and the New Narrative writers to show how the politics of form, erased from lived experience, alienates those that feel unjustly treated by a society that authors them as abject. So, I want to return to that conference at UCSC in 1990, for which De Lauretis coined the term Queer Theory. In the notes to her introduction for the special issue of *Differences*, De Lauretis writes; “the term ‘queer’ was suggested to me by a conference in which I had participated” (xvii). De Lauretis is referring to the conference titled “How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video,” organized by the group Bad Object Choices, held in New York in 1989. This conference would result in a book of the same name published in 1991. In the introduction to this book, Bad Object Choices writes; “we have to imagine and produce a sense of solidarity sturdy enough to act collectively, but supple enough to interfere with ethnocentric pressures that feel at times like a cultural law of gravity, pressures that work everywhere to absorb ethnic and racial differences, casting others as mirrors or tools of a homogenous (white) subject” (24). A running theme of the work the group collect here is that “all of the essays...describe intersections of theoretical study with collective political struggle” (13). But, “Queer” is not really defined in the conference or volume, and at times the term seems to be used interchangeably with “Lesbian and Gay.” De Lauretis explains that her intention in using the term “Queer” is “to mark a certain critical distance from [Lesbian and Gay]” (iv). De Lauretis traces earlier terms that were academically favored, such as “Gay” (meaning both gay men and women), “Homosexual,” and then the phrase “Lesbian and Gay,” and writes that “the term ‘Queer Theory’ was arrived at in the effort to avoid all of these fine distinctions in our discursive protocols, not to adhere to any one of the given terms, not to assume their ideological

liabilities, but instead to both transgress and transcend them—or at the very least problematize them” (v). De Lauretis then feels it necessary to clarify, in the notes, that her “Queer” is not the same as the “Queer” of “Queer Nation” (xvii). It is Queer Nation that Cathy J. Cohen critiques for allowing the potential of queer politics to be reduced by collapsing the meaning of queer into “not heterosexual,” resulting in a binarism. And, as noted before, Sedgwick critiques the Hetero/Homo binarism as it creates a situation wherein one term is subordinate to the other and depends on the other for its meaning. And therefore, the Hetero/Homo binarism inevitably reifies heterosexuality as the norm even when it seeks to do the opposite (*Epistemology of the Closet*, 9-10).

So, how is De Lauretis’s “Queer” different to that of “Queer Nation”? What De Lauretis is suggesting in her version of “Queer” is similar to the subjectless critique introduced by Michael Warner in the Introduction to his edited collection *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (1993). Warner writes; “for both academics and activists, ‘queer’ gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual” (xxvi). Although this broadens the collective potential of Queer’s strength of interpellation, it still reifies the normative. And, as Cohen points out, a collective category tends to diminish to [what do you mean to say here?] the particularities and concerns of its dominant group. Just as hegemony purports to create a “universal,” which is really just a mask for the particularities of the dominant group within the hegemony, Queer, through subjectless analysis, tends to be dominated by the white, middle class and cisgender cohort of the collective. What I am saying here is that “Queer,” in its subjectless form, has not been “supple enough to [resist] pressures that work everywhere to absorb ethnic and racial differences.” And, theoretical discussion of the term “Queer” and its analytical efficacy, which sometimes seems to collapse into its political efficacy,

seems to disregard the sociopolitical impetus for the collectives that grasped onto the abjecting pejorative of “queer” in the first place. As De Lauretis notes, just after describing her intentions behind the naming of queer theory, “a common front or political alliance of gay men and lesbians (I am speaking generally, of course, not of personal friendships) is made possible, and indeed necessary, in the United States today by the AIDS national emergency and the pervasive institutional backlash against queers of all sexes” (v). And now, as I write this in 2023, there are new reasons for political alliance, including attacks on Trans rights, limitations on medical care for Trans folk, renewed efforts at book banning, curriculum limitations on discussing gender, sexuality, and racial issues (both contemporary and historical), to name just a few. I am not sure that “Queer,” particularly as a subjectless term of analysis dedicated to “protesting...the *idea* of normal behavior” is enough (Warner (xxvii)). Although I sure am nostalgic for a time when transgression felt like a radical political statement. To reiterate Kreiner’s critique of Language Writing; “Forms don’t have politics. People do.” Perhaps we are asking a word, “queer,” to do too much work for us on its own? Remember, it is people who have politics.

## Chapter 2: “He’s One of Those People Who Weren’t Invited to This Funeral”: Inauthentic Homecomings and the Phantasmatic Normative Child

“Now that he was dead, he belonged to my mother and my grandmother. They were the ones people felt bad for even though it seemed like neither of them were even that close to him” (Brunt, 25). These are fourteen-year-old June Elbus’s thoughts while attending her uncle’s funeral. The 2012 New York Times Bestselling novel *Tell the Wolves I’m Home*, by Carol Rifka Brunt is a coming-of-age novel told from the perspective of fourteen-year-old June, and it is set in 1986 New York State, moving between Westchester County, an affluent suburban area, and New York City. In the novel, a homosexual couple, Finn and Toby, have moved back to New York after being diagnosed HIV+ in order to be closer to Finn’s family. Finn wants to have a relationship with his sister, June’s mother Danielle, and nieces—June and her older sister Greta. However, Danielle will only allow a relationship if Finn keeps details of his life hidden. For example, Finn is not allowed to tell his nieces that he has a partner, Toby. Danielle blames Toby for Finn’s HIV, although they have no idea who contracted the virus first (this is 1986, and we are led to believe that Finn and Toby have already been HIV+ for several years). When June learns about Toby after Finn’s death, she asks her mother why she never knew about him. Danielle replies; “because I didn’t want you or Greta to have anything to do with that man. Finn knew that was the deal. If he wanted a relationship with his nieces, he would have to keep Toby out of it...You can’t have everything. That’s something Finn never understood” (167). June loves her uncle very much, and always wants to spend time with him. He shares the world of the arts with her, and a love of history. And, after Finn’s death, June strikes up a secret friendship with Toby.



Throughout much of AIDS literature and film, both fiction and non-fiction, there are countless stories of gay men returning home to the families that had already rejected them, hoping to be taken care of in their final days, often because they had nowhere else to turn. Or, as in Finn's case, all they want is to be reunified with their family and feel the love they had been denied. Returning to a sight of rejection out of desperation, or the desire for acceptance, demonstrates the precarity of People With AIDS, and despite the fact that innovations in treatment have helped to diminish the occurrence of this situation for those HIV+ people with medical insurance and access to treatment, it is ongoing in communities with less access. When *An Early Frost* (1985)—the first film dealing with AIDS to be broadcast on television by a major network in the United States—was released, the headline on the cover of *People Magazine* read: “An AIDS TV movie brings home EVERY PARENT’S NIGHTMARE. First you find out your son is gay. Then you learn he’s dying”<sup>15</sup> (emphasis in original, *People Weekly*, November 18, 1985). Some of these returning sons were rejected outright, while others were offered an inauthentic homecoming, like Finn with his family. He was allowed to be around his nieces, under specific circumstances, but not allowed to share anything about his homosexual relationship.

An inauthentic homecoming could come in many forms, including after someone has already died and their body is claimed for a family burial. What I am trying to describe is a feeling of being reintegrated into a family on a stipulation that you inauthentically represent yourself, or allow your family to inauthentically represent you. This kind of return is unfulfilling and alienating, as it is a return of the child that a family wishes they had, and not a full return of the child they do have. By this I mean, Finn is allowed to see his nieces about once a month, but

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, this headline misrepresents the film's narrative, as the son first reveals that he has HIV, which leads his family to learn about his homosexuality, suggesting that HIV equals homosexual.

he is only allowed to share part of himself. These inauthentic relationships are not limited to AIDS, and not limited to LGBTQ+ individuals, but HIV/AIDS, particularly during the period of 1980-1996, was often the impetus for these inauthentic homecomings, and it has become a trope in AIDS narratives. At the heart of these inauthentic homecomings is abjection from the family, often for being perceived as un-family-like or unwholesome. These rejections are part of identity formation. And, in some cases a family holds onto an inauthentic ideal of the child they rejected, while expelling the actual child. I call this inauthentic ideal of a child the phantasmatic normative child. In what follows, I will discuss some real-life examples of rejection and inauthentic homecomings in Ruth Coker Burk's memoir *All the Young Men: A Memoir of Love, AIDS, and Chosen Family in the American South* (2020). I will then turn to Brunt's *Tell The Wolves I'm Home*, with occasional counterpoints from Rebecca Makkai's *The Great Believers* (2018), a Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award finalist, as well as a Carnegie Medal and Stonewall Book Award winner. I turn to these books in order to explore how familial abjection and family attachments to the phantasmatic normative child affect identity. In addition to the books mentioned above, I will also discuss Thom Fitzgerald's 1997 film *The Hanging Garden* to illustrate my concept of the phantasmatic normative child.

As you may have noticed, the books I will be highlighting here—*All the Young Men*, *Tell The Wolves I'm Home*, and *The Great Believers*—are relatively contemporary, published between 2012 and 2020. Additionally, as far as I know, they are all written by cisgender, heterosexual, white women. This, of course, is difficult to document, as cisgender, heterosexual, white people often do not identify their race, gender identity or sexuality (which problematically reifies cisgender, white heterosexuality as the norm). I gather that they are cisgender, heterosexual white women because they all have or have had husbands, none of them identify a

race and all are visibly white passing, and none of them have identified a gender or sexual identity. I focus on these contemporary works by presumably heterosexual, cisgender white women in order to understand how the history of AIDS is constantly being constructed and adapted, and to look at what narratives are being perpetuated. It is also helpful to see, from an outside perspective, how these narratives deal with AIDS and gay male identity. In *We Are Having This Conversation Now: The Times of AIDS Cultural Production* (2022), Alexandra Juhasz and Theodore Kerr propose a flexible and permeable periodization for what they refer to as “the times of AIDS.” Starting in 2008, they identify a period of “AIDS Crisis Revisitation” (xiv). This period is characterized by “a sudden deluge of cultural production focused on earlier responses to the virus” (xiv). Part of the ethical necessity of this period of revisitation and historicization is an enhanced discourse on HIV/AIDS “in terms of race, gender, sexuality, [and] prevention” (xiv). And, in “Sources and Influences: Timeline 3,” which ends the book, Juhasz and Kerr compile an important list, broken down by year, of cultural productions dealing with the AIDS crisis, from 1981-2021 (227-249). Throughout their book, Juhasz and Kerr insist on the non-linearity of time, despite our felt, linear experience of it. In this period of AIDS Crisis Revisitation, we must pay attention to how cultural productions are shaping the history of AIDS, and how that memorialization is in tension with the ongoing nature of the AIDS epidemic. And contemporary novels and nonfiction books (here meaning 2010-2020) which pose the dawn of the AIDS crisis as a historical setting contribute to and shape the cultural understanding of the times of AIDS.

With so much careful work being done to confront the history of AIDS from an intersectional perspective, it is important to consider how harmful narratives—such as the imbrication of AIDS with gay white cisgender male identity, and the idea that AIDS was external

to the normative, white, middle class heteropatriarchal nuclear family—might be perpetuated and reified by some of these historical books. And, despite the fact that the framework of some of these books may seem to propagate tolerance and/or compassion for AIDS victims, they can still perpetuate the idea that the HIV/AIDS crisis is something external to mainstream or normative society and history, and link HIV/AIDS to morality. Rather than narrating HIV/AIDS as a part of U.S. and global history, we often see stories in which the HIV virus and its medical, social and political effects figure as something external to “normal” American History, outside of the precious heteropatriarchal nuclear family, like a specter peering in the suburban single-family occupancy window; a haunting from outside. Narratives that reinforce a belief in the “naturalness” or supremacy of the heteropatriarchal nuclear family as some predestined or natural social structure contribute to ongoing stigmatization, psychic and developmental damage to queer folk, and stigmatizing associations of HIV with same-sex sexuality, contributing to the historical erasures of connections between race, economic class, and grassroots efforts at prevention and care that the period of AIDS Crisis Revisitation is meant to address. Additionally, narratives that ignore the networks of support that were developed in response to the stigmatization of people with aids, such as chosen family, grassroots support and activist networks, and direct action protest groups, construct a history of AIDS devoid of government inaction, as well as racist, homophobic, transphobic, anti-drug and sex negative persecution and dehumanizing discourses that proliferated and were reinforced by HIV/AIDS. As Sarah Schulman laments when contemplating the historicization of AIDS; “after all this death and all this pain and all this unbearable truth about persecution, suffering, and the indifference of the protected, *Now*, they’re going to pretend that *naturally, normally* things just *happened* to get better” (emphasis in original, 2).

Ruth Coker Burks began her AIDS care and advocacy work in Arkansas when, while visiting a friend in the hospital in 1986, she heard a weak call for help emerging from a hospital room, and noticed that none of the nurses were answering the call. She went and asked the young man what he needed, and he said “I want my momma.” Coker Burks went to the nurses station and asked for them to call his mother, to which the nurses replied “She ain’t coming....He’s been here six weeks. Nobody is coming.” Coker Burks gets the number and calls anyways, only to be told “My son is already dead....*My son* died when he went gay....I don’t know what sinner you’ve got in that hospital, but that thing is not my son” (4-6). The mother’s reaction here makes a distinction between *her son* and the gay man that is dying in the hospital, only laying claim to the child of her fantasy (phantasmatic normative child), a child that, in her mind, died when she realized that her son was gay. This evidences a fractured identity in the mind of the mother; there was *her son*, the child that had lived with her until she learned of his homosexuality, and there was the homosexual, now dying of AIDS alone, or, as she referred to him, “that thing.” Only one of these persons is an actual human individual, and that is the man dying alone. What she refers to as “*My son* [who] died when he went gay” is a phantom constructed through a regime of normalization that this woman chooses to latch onto rather than the actual son dying in a hospital room alone, an abject figure crying for his mother that even the hospital nurses refuse to care for.

This is just the first patient dying of AIDS that Ruth sits with in their final moments. Soon, Coker Burks realizes that many of these men she sits with while they are dying had returned to Hot Springs, Arkansas in order to see their families again before they died, and hopefully be taken care of by them. Many of them only returned to Arkansas because it was their last choice, after their friends and lovers had already died, and they had lost their jobs and apartments. But most were rejected upon their attempted homecoming, and end up dying alone in

an Arkansas hospital room that the nurses are too afraid to enter. Coker Burks expands her work into anonymous testing and prevention, which integrates her into the local LGBTQ+ community surrounding the only gay bar at that time in Hot Springs Arkansas, Our House.<sup>16</sup> When one of the patrons that she is friendly with, Jerry, gets sick, she goes to the hospital often to sit with him. After his death, she is surprised that his family, who had rejected him in his life, want to arrange the funeral. Much of the Our House community attend the funeral, all sitting in the back, trying to be respectful of the family. They are surprised by how many family members show up to the funeral, knowing that his family had nothing to do with him while he was alive. Coker Burks even thinks to herself perhaps she had misjudged the family. However, Coker Burks and her friends are shocked when the deceased's brother gets up to deliver the eulogy with an angry look on his face, and says "*This* is what happens. This is the homosexual lifestyle....Jesus Christ gave my brother the greatest gift. Life. And this is what he did with it. If you sin like Jerry, you end up like him." Coker Burks and her friends watch silently as the family members nod in agreement, and Burks observes, "this wasn't a eulogy. It was a hate rally" (296-297). Burks notes; "we all had things we wished we'd said. But we didn't" (297). In the face of such violent rejection, while their friend's dead body was laid out in front of them, they were all too afraid to speak. But Burks points out, "Jerry—their brother, son, cousin—was a stranger to them, and our love for him was a threat" (297). The family had allowed a homecoming, but only to validate their own rejection, and, as is the nature of abjection, to define themselves against that which had been rejected, their homosexual family member. For these people, AIDS was justified, and it allowed them to feel self-assured in expelling a homosexual family member, and assured in their protection from AIDS, as it was associated with Jerry, the homosexual sinner, and not them; this

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<sup>16</sup> Eventually Coker Burks also works with sex workers and strippers, providing safer sex consultations and anonymous HIV testing.

gay man's death due to AIDS justified their own prejudices, and the entire funeral was an elaborate "told you so" ritual. Additionally, Jerry's chosen family, the predominantly gay and lesbian community from Our House, undoubtedly felt retraumatized in witnessing this continued abjection in death. Many of them, I imagine, relived similar moments of familial expulsion while attending this funeral.

One of the people from Our House that Coker Burks becomes very close friends with is Billy, or Miss Marilyn Morrell, one of the most popular, and youngest, drag queens at the bar. His family did not have much to do with him, except for the time they came to look at his possessions, knowing his death due to advanced AIDS was near, asking his lover what he would give them. So, when Coker Burks calls Billy's mother to tell her of his death, she is very surprised that Billy's mother insists on arranging the funeral and burial in Billy's small Arkansas hometown, Dover. Coker Burks tries to argue that Billy would have preferred to be laid to rest in Hot Springs, but his mother replies, "Nope, our son died of cancer, and he'll be buried up here" (327). Coker Burks asks permission to attend the funeral, and Billy's mother tells her that she can come, but with a stipulation; "But I don't want any of those faggots at the funeral" (327). "Those faggots" would include all the people that cared for Billy in his life, including his devoted partner that nursed and looked after him throughout his illness. After she gets the date, time and location of the funeral, Coker Burks writes; "I proceeded to call everybody I knew," and "the day of the funeral, I led a twenty-two-car caravan of the fiercest queens I knew up to Dover" (327). Billy's body was allowed a homecoming, but it was inauthentic. His mother insisted that he had died of cancer, in order to dissociate him with AIDS, demonstrating the imbrication of HIV/AIDS with male homosexuality. Additionally, Billy's lover, caregiver and supporter, as well as his community of friends, was not welcomed to the funeral. And, they

would not have been able to “crash” the funeral without the intervention of Coker Burks, a cisgender heterosexual woman.

I want to take a moment here and focus on one recurring trope in stories about the early part of the AIDS epidemic that would fall under the category of inauthentic homecomings, which is a family hosting the funeral/memorial of a gay man who died of AIDS and disallowing their friends and lovers from attending the funeral. These funerals that ignore the homosexual life of the man allow the family to mourn the child they wished they had had, the phantasmatic normative child. In *Tell the Wolves I'm Home*, June and her family seem to know very little of her uncle Finn's life past the age of seventeen when he left home, despite the fact that Finn tried to keep in contact with his sister through letters. After June befriends Toby, Finn's partner, he tells June, “[Finn] told me he wrote to [Danielle] all the time. Right from the day he left. On the bus out of town. For years he didn't hear anything back. Not a single letter” (205). And, whenever June's mother does reminisce about Finn, it is about him as a child. When June's mother speaks at the funeral, she “gave a short speech about Finn and her as kids. About what a good brother he'd been. Everything she said was vague...” (30). In his memorial, Finn's life as an adult gay man is effectively erased, in preference to memorializing him as a child. June, considering the funeral, thinks; “My mother had arranged for the funeral to be held at a funeral home in our town instead of in the city where all of Finn's friends lived. There was no argument about it. It felt like she was trying to gather him up. Like she was trying to keep Finn all to herself” (25).<sup>17</sup> In other words, this was not a funeral for Finn the gay man that had just died of AIDS. Rather, it was a funeral for a phantasmatic, normative version of Finn that the family

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<sup>17</sup> This is also the only mention in the novel of Finn and Toby having any friends or acquaintances. Other than this one line, the reader is led to assume that Finn and Toby have a reclusive, isolated life with no other support systems.



wanted to reclaim. Toby, Finn's partner, was not invited to the funeral. When the family pulls into the parking lot outside the funeral home, Danielle says "He's here," and Brunt notes, "her voice was a strange combination of anger and panic" (24). At this point in the narrative, June still does not even know that Finn had a partner. So, she is very curious about this man sitting outside the funeral home. After Danielle goes into the funeral home, June and Greta's father asks; "I want you two to tell me if you see that man come in, okay?...For your mother and grandmother's sake, got it?" (28). June and Greta stand outside, not far away from the man. June realizes that her older sister must know something that she does not, so she asks "Who is he anyway?" (28). Greta walked down the path, closer to the man who was trying to make eye contact with June, then "Greta stopped, waited a second, cleared her throat" and said "'He's one of those people who weren't invited to this funeral,' ...loud enough for him to hear" (28). June is still confused by the situation, and asks her older sister to explain. Then, right before they walk into the door of the funeral home, Greta turned, "pointed to the man and said, 'He's the guy that killed Uncle Finn'" (29). This is when June realizes that the man must have been Finn's boyfriend, but after Greta's comment he gets into his car and leaves. Finn's return to the family that the suburban exclusionary funeral would seem to represent is not an authentic return. The family allows the phantasmatic normative child to return to the family and die, but not the gay man. Finn's sexuality was rejected by their family due to his inability, or unwillingness, to live inauthentically and reproduce the heteropatriarchal nuclear family unit. Excising Finn, the well-adjusted and happy gay man, from the family, while mourning the phantasmatic normative child of their imagination, is violent, socially and psychologically.

Similar to *Tell The Wolves*, Makkai's *The Great Believers* begins with a funeral as well. Actually, it would be a memorial party. We meet the major characters of the novel, including the

primary protagonist Fiona, at a memorial for Fiona's brother, Nico, who has just died of AIDS related issues. But, it's not actually the *official* funeral, as Nico's lover and friends were not welcome at the church funeral, although the family had offered a compromise and allowed Nico's lover and friends to join in a vigil the night before the funeral. While at the vigil, Yale, a secondary protagonist, thinks, "family members told stories only about Nico as a child, as if he'd died in adolescence," (6) demonstrating that the vigil was not meant to allow for mourning of the homosexual man that died of AIDS, but for mourning the phantasmatic projection of the normative child that had never really existed. The following day, Fiona, Nico's sister, joins Nico's chosen family for an informal memorial party rather than partake in the family's funeral. "Fiona had told them all, last night, that she wasn't going to the funeral—that she'd be here instead—but still it was jarring to see her, to know that she'd followed through" (3). As opposed to Brunt's narrative, Makkai's novel demonstrates that there are alternative networks of kinship and support outside of the heteropatriarchal nuclear family, while also demonstrating how families seized on AIDS related deaths to reclaim the children they had rejected, and mourn the phantasmatic normative child. Makkai writes that Fiona had "written off her family as thoroughly as they'd written Nico off in the years before his illness. (Until, in his last days, they'd claimed him, insisting he die in the suburbs in an ill-equipped hospital with nice wallpaper)" (3). Although both Brunt's and Makkai's novels have narratives of heteropatriarchal nuclear families expelling and pathologizing homosexual children as abject, Makkai's novel demonstrates the alternative social structures created by those that have been rejected by their families. Brunt's novel leaves Toby and Finn with no alternative systems of support. Part of the reason that June befriends Toby, other than curiosity, is that she finds a note from Finn after his death telling her "Toby has nobody," and asking her to "look after him" (Brunt 153). Now that I

have introduced examples (in fiction and in memoir) of memorials for the phantasmatic normative child while the gay men who had died of AIDS are erased from the memorialization process, I will introduce the theoretical background I have worked with in order to develop this idea, and illustrate the concept through analysis of the film *The Hanging Garden*.

Building upon Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of a phantom personality, and Serge Leclaire's concept of primary narcissistic representation, I will theorize the constructed apparition of a normative child that a family holds onto and memorializes at the expense of their real child in the world whom they have declared abject, and expelled from the family. Didier Eribon begins *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* (1999) with the declaration "It all begins with an insult" (15). Building on the work of J. L. Austin, Eribon claims that an insult can be thought of as a performative utterance; "insult is a linguistic act—or a series of repeated linguistic acts—by which a particular place in the world is assigned to the person at whom the acts are directed" (17). Insult functions as a method "to establish or to renew the barrier between 'normal' people and those [Erving] Goffman calls 'stigmatized' people and to cause the internalization of that barrier within the individual being insulted" (17). Thus, insult becomes an originary queer moment, in which one is both branded, and achieves a self-realization of one's own queerness.

Eribon's theorization of the relationship between subjectivity and insult is based on the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, and therefore draws on existentialism and phenomenology. In "The Look"<sup>18</sup> Sartre details his conception of the process through which one realizes that one is not only a subject, or individual, but that we are all subjects living amidst other subjects.<sup>19</sup> This realization of the subjectivity of others leads to self-reflection, in which we see ourselves as others see us.

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<sup>18</sup> This is a section of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*.

<sup>19</sup> Sartre's theorization of an individual learning to see the Other as a subject, rather than an object, and how that then effects one's conception of one's self in the world, is reminiscent of Heidegger's distinction made between Being and Being-in-the-world.

This process of self-realization hinges on the transformation of the Other-as-object to the Other-as-subject, which has as its catalyst the realization that one is “*being seen* by the other” (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 344). One of the affects that follows from the realization that one is being seen by the Other is shame; “...shame...is shame of *self*; it is the *recognition* of the fact that I *am* indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging” (Sartre *Being and Nothingness* 350). Shame is not necessary for the constitution of the self under the gaze of the Other,<sup>20</sup> but Shame indicates a self-constitution within a regime of normalization, and shame is often particularly formative for LGBTQ+ subjects in an oppressive social structure. Under Sartre’s model, shame is at the heart of self-realization and individuation; “Shame reveals to me that I *am* this being, not in the mode of ‘was’ or of ‘having to be’ but *in-itself*” (Sartre *Being and Nothingness* 351). But this all depends on what I do when I realize that I am being seen by the other, and how my actions relate to the judgment that the other may look at me with.

I draw attention to the action that evokes the judgmental look of the other, because shame does not exist for itself, or on its own;

[Shame] operates ordinarily only after interest or enjoyment has been activated, and inhibits one or the other or both...Once shame has been activated, the original excitement or joy may be increased again and inhibit the shame or the shame may further inhibit and reduce excitement or joy. (Tomkins 134-135)

Silvan Tomkins demonstrates that shame is a result, and must be preceded by interest or enjoyment. Tomkins explains that after shame is activated, there are two possible paths. Shame requires a decision to be made (whether that decision is conscious or not is unimportant here) in regards to whether the interest or enjoyment that was activated can override the shame response, or whether the shame is too much to override. In that case, the actions which inspired the look of

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<sup>20</sup> See D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock, 1971), especially “Mirror-role of Mother and Family in Child Development.”

judgment, the verbal insult, or the social condemnation, must be self-censored in the future. I would like to add that there is a middle road here as well, in which one self-censors when in public, but proceeds with their interest or enjoyment when in private or a safe space. This middle road constructs the proverbial closet door that can be opened and closed situationally, for one's own protection. Therefore, not only does shame shape subjectivity, and the awareness of one's self as amongst other subjectivities, but shame itself is subjective, and culturally/situationally specific. That is, shame reflects culture, and is therefore an apparatus of normalization.

Building on Sartre's work in *Anti-Semite and Jew*, Eribon describes how the social gaze that conveys disapproval and judgment, or the insult, results in a fracturing of the individual, which manifests as what Sartre labels a "phantom personality";

A "phantom personality" haunts the gay man despite himself and because this "personality" is nothing other than "himself as others see him"—or, what amounts to the same thing, himself occupying the specific derogatory place he is assigned in the sexual order—that every gay man must one day "assume" that personality, must choose to be what he is or else give up freedom and annihilate himself as a person in order to comply with demands of the society that both insults him as a homosexual and denies him the right to declare that he is gay. (Eribon 111, citing Sartre *Anti-Semite and Jew* 90-91)

The shame response, and the decision to either inhibit shame or allow shame to "inhibit or reduce excitement or joy," becomes a decision between authenticity and inauthenticity: "thus is 'inauthenticity' a form of submission to the social order and to oppressive structures, while 'authenticity' is above all a refusal of this order" (Eribon 111). Additionally, for those who choose "authenticity," Eribon claims; "There is always another 'phantom personage' that haunts every gay person in contemporary society. It is not the one created by the 'gaze' of the other, but the one opposed to that gaze, constructed in opposition to it by gay visibility itself" (112). This gives agency to self-identification as a homosexual, and shows gay visibility as a deliberate and defiant act of self-constitution/identification. I would add that there is a third possibility of a

phantom person, one which is created by the other, and that is the phantasmatic normative self that haunts one who has chosen authenticity. When assumptions of normativity are shattered, they leave a remainder of that assumed normative subject. The abjection of the judgmental gaze which ignites the shame-response creates a sort of excess, wherein the excess is the normative child that haunts the family; the phantasmatic normative child is an excess of the individual rejected for their choice of authenticity. The phantasmatic normative child is perceived as something that has been lost, although it never truly existed; the phantasmatic normative child has always been a projection of familial desire. This perceived loss weighs on the shamed individual as well as the family/friends etc. who mourn for the normative child. According to Serge Leclaire, we are all haunted by this internalized normative child within ourselves. Leclaire proposes that the “wonderful child” our parents expect and create lives on within us. This “wonderful child” is a primary narcissistic representation that has been internalized, and, Leclaire claims, part of the work of psychoanalysis is to kill this primary narcissistic representation.

Psychoanalytic practice is based upon bringing to the fore *the constant work of a power of death—the death of the wonderful (or terrifying) child who, from generation to generation, bears witness to parents’ dreams and desires. There can be no life without killing that strange, original image in which everyone’s birth is inscribed.* It is an impossible but necessary murder, for there can be no life, no life of desire and creation, if we ever stop killing off the always returning “wonderful child.” (Emphasis in original 2)

But, although we can constantly work towards killing the primary narcissistic representation within ourselves, what of the constructed phantasmatic normative child our families may choose to latch onto? This is demonstrated in countless HIV/AIDS narratives, but we have seen two

examples above from contemporary novels, as well as the examples from Ruth Coker Burks' memoir, wherein a family chooses to mourn this phantasmatic normative child rather than the actual gay man that has died of AIDS. For these families that never let go of the "wonderful child" of their imagination, AIDS was an opportunity.

Regimes of normalization and the related formation of shame cause a rupture, resulting in an abject excess. By excess here, I mean the phantasmatic normative child that haunts the family, as this construct is in excess to the abject individual. This abject excess constructs the closet and its phantom personalities as well as the phantasmatic normative child. The homosexual rejected by their family (authentic self), the suicidal, and self-hating inauthentic self, and the phantasmatic normative child are all visualized in gay director Thom Fitzgerald's 1997 film *The Hanging Garden*, in which the sixteen-year-old Sweet William (all the family members are named after flowers), overweight and awkward, is caught by his grandmother sexually experimenting with his male best friend in the garden. The grandmother screams out of her window, informing the whole family of what they are doing. Shortly after this, Sweet William leaves home, and does not return for ten years. Upon his return, the home is haunted by an excess of Sweet William. We see three versions of Sweet William simultaneously occupying the family home: 1. his twenty-six-year-old self, a relatively well-adjusted gay man (authenticity); 2. his sixteen-year-old and suicidal self freshly rejected by his family and fractured by the shame of being seen during his same-sex sexual experimentation (inauthenticity); and 3. the phantasmatic normative child, the child of his parents' desires. All three of these versions of Sweet William are present, and visible to the family and each other.

William sees his sixteen-year-old-self hanging from the tree in the garden, having committed suicide— which would have been one of his options at the time of his familial rejection. This

represents inauthenticity because it is the version of William that was not able to override the shame response and choose to live authentically. Meanwhile, his parents interact with his child self, the “wonderful child” of their construction, reliving possible mistakes that caused William to turn out “wrong.” The pressure that the family puts on itself by trying to hold on to the child with a normative future causes them to live within a feedback loop of reliving that “pre-queer” life over and over, while constantly rehashing the “mistakes” they made which they perceive as causing their child to turn out gay.

William eventually reincorporates his sixteen-year-old self with his adult-self by cutting the sixteen-year-old body down from the tree and burying it. He shows that boy the sympathy and care his family did not. But the family is not willing to let go of the pre-shame, normative child, fixating on this apparition much more than they are willing to interact with the twenty-six-year-old gay man in front of them. The last scene of the film shows the father reliving his abusive mistakes with the young child over and over again. Thus, William has incorporated his inauthentic phantom self, which is represented by the sixteen-year-old hanging from a noose, with his authentic self, the one who left the family, but we are still left with this remainder, the phantasmatic normative child. This remainder, the phantasmatic normative child, is an apparition of a thing that never truly lived. But the family continues to prioritize their obsession with this phantasmatic remainder rather than developing a relationship with the actual Sweet William.

*Insult* poses the social gaze as a regime of normativity, but it does not discuss where that construction of normativity originates from. *The Hanging Garden*, by contrast, suggests that the traditional biological family structure is not necessarily the root of compulsory heterosexuality, but it is the administrator in shame’s regime of normalization. With uncle Finn and his partner’s deaths due to AIDS, the external pressure on the nuclear family of *Tell The*



*Wolves* is removed, and June's family can put to rest the phantasmatic normative child. So, whereas William's family in *The Hanging Garden* will continue to be haunted by the phantasmatic normative child, while continuing to reject the actual William, AIDS allows June's family to erase the gay man that is uncle Finn and memorialize the phantasmatic normative child. June, looking at her father in the car before her uncle Finn's funeral thinks; "He didn't seem sad about Finn dying. If anything, I thought, he acted like it was a relief." AIDS is a resolution for them, as it was for many families. The trope of families having memorials for their child that died of AIDS while not allowing the lovers and friends to attend has been very common in non-fiction and fiction AIDS narratives. What is significant here is how this trope continues to uncritically circulate in *Tell The Wolves I'm Home*. The trope is also present in *The Great Believers*, but Makkai confronts this erasure through highlighting the informal memorial held by Nico's chosen family and support system.

Additionally, Nico's death, and the deaths of so many of their friends, is not a resolution for Fiona, but an ongoing source of trauma. *The Great Believers* integrates the early part of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States with the social fabric and history of the country, acknowledging the long-term, ongoing transgenerational trauma wrought by the epidemic, not just on homosexuals, sex workers and IV drug users, but on a cisgender heterosexual mother and her daughter. In this vein, the novel demonstrates the widespread effects of HIV, rather than limiting it to a countercultural phenomenon somehow outside of or external to the heteropatriarchal nuclear family unit. In the portion of *The Great Believers* that takes place in 2015, Fiona is searching for her estranged daughter in Paris. After she locates her, the tenuously begin trying to develop a new relationship. Fiona has always been traumatized that her best friend, Yale (the secondary protagonist of the novel) died of AIDS in the hospital while she was

recovering from childbirth. At one point, Claire, Fiona's daughter, tells a family friend; "There was always—when I was a kid, there was part of me that thought if only I'd been born *after* he died, she'd believe I was him, reincarnated or something. Then *I* could believe it, even. I wished I'd been born that exact instant" (400). This indicates that Claire had always felt that her mother's trauma made her emotionally unavailable to her own daughter, and it was a point of contention in their relationship. This allows the reader to see the transgenerational trauma of AIDS, and indicates the ongoing social effects of the pandemic. AIDS is not rendered as an externality to the lives of these two heterosexual women, but as something that has had a lasting effect on them.

In Chapter one of the *Tell the Wolves*, when Danielle, Great and June are driving to Finn's apartment in New York City for their monthly visit, June thinks to herself;

my mother had on KICK FM, the country station, and even though I don't really like country music, sometimes, if you let it, the sound of all those people singing their hearts out can bring to mind big old family barbecues in the backyard and snowy hillsides with kids sledding and Thanksgiving dinners. Wholesome stuff. That's why my mother liked to listen to it on the way to Finn's. (4)

June's thoughts here suggest that "wholesome stuff" is exactly opposite to a visit to their uncle's, setting up family, holidays, and children in opposition to their gay uncle that lives in the city. It is almost as if Danielle needs to saturate herself and her two daughters with a "wholesome" family-oriented attitude before being exposed to the possible corruption of the homosexual, who is cast as un-family-like. Despite the suggestion that he was made to leave the family at the age of seventeen due to the homophobia of a military father, Danielle sees Finn as a selfish deserter who abandoned her. Brunt never actually reveals the exact details of Finn's sudden departure

from the family at the age of seventeen, but *suggests* that it was a lack of acceptance of his homosexuality. Toby, Finn's partner, tells June,

Finn always felt sad that he and Danielle weren't close, that she'd drifted away from him. They used to be so close. Because of all the moving [military family]. They were all each other had for so many years. She was the one who made sure their father never had any idea about Finn being gay. Finn didn't care who knew, but she understood what it would mean. Especially with their father being this big military guy. (Brunt 205)

This suggests that Danielle, June's mother, had an understanding of her father's homophobia, and expected him to reject her brother if Finn's sexuality were ever disclosed. Danielle even "set up fake dates with her friends for Finn" (Brunt 205) in order to keep his sexuality hidden from the family. Daniel organizes this façade to protect Finn from being cast out, but at the same time it forces Finn into an inauthentic self-presentation. And, despite Danielle's knowledge of her brother's precarity in the family unit, she ultimately rejected him due to her anger over his leaving, never responding to his letters, and placing limitations on his relationship with the family when he attempts reunification. It is as if Danielle would have preferred an inauthentic illusion of harmony to preserve the appearance of a normative nuclear family. Although her primary goal in encouraging Finn to maintain an inauthentic self-representation is to keep her connection with him, living a closeted, inauthentic life is a price he was either unable or unwilling to pay.

Finn is spoken about as if he had chosen homosexuality over his family, and therefore abandoned them. Danielle tells June "You need to understand some things about Finn...He did whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted. He didn't always..." Then June interjects with "Care what other people wanted him to do?" and Danielle replies "Yes." June pushes this a little further and adds "He didn't care what you wanted him to do" (53). Danielle sees Finn's departure as his choice, and resents him for it. When they were children, they both dreamed of becoming artists

and living in New York City, which Finn eventually achieves. But Danielle is an accountant, married to an accountant, living in the suburbs and raising children. The only reason Finn is able to coerce his sister to bring his nieces to see him once a month is under the pretext of painting a portrait of them before his impending death. Danielle agrees, the condition she stipulates, that Finn does not share any information about his homosexual relationship with Toby, and makes sure that Toby is never present when the family visits, is another case of forcing inauthentic self-representation onto her younger brother. Additionally, the children being told that Finn had chosen his lifestyle and therefore deserved to be cut off from the family is establishing that the same could happen to them if they stray from the path set out for them by familial and societal expectations of normativity, defined as adherence to the heteropatriarchal nuclear family. “You can’t have everything. That’s something Finn never understood” (167); this is Danielle’s constant refrain about her brother, and excuse for not allowing him to share his life fully with his nieces.

Any of Toby and Finn’s attempts to build a life or a community of relations outside of their nuclear families is not addressed in *Tell The Wolves*. Toby is portrayed as completely alone once Finn dies, depending on June for any companionship. Brunt gives the reader no possibility of alternative kinship structures outside of the heteropatriarchal nuclear family unit, and the message here seems to be that you must always forgive your nuclear family members, as they are all you will ever have. At the end of the penultimate chapter, June suggests that the person she was at the beginning of the novel, the young girl deeply attached to her gay uncle, was deeply sad because she was not able to accept the life she had been born into, meaning the role her nuclear family has set out for her. June thinks that if she was able to find that girl again, she would be crying. She thinks to herself, “Her tears tell the story of what she knows. That the past,

present, and future are just one thing. Home is home is home” (351). The repetition here suggests that home is self-defining, and the repetition emphasizes this. “Home is home is home” also suggest an “it is what it is” kind of resignation to the familial regime of normalization. The *Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary* defines this idiom as an expression “used to say that a situation cannot be changed and must be accepted.” However, there also seems to be an implied ellipsis here that the reader cannot help but fill in, either consciously or subconsciously. From my perspective, I read this as “Home is traumatizing, but home is a situation which cannot be changed, and therefore home must be accepted.” From this perspective, the novel is a sad tale of a family doomed to reproduce generational trauma, and all members of the family, not only the abject homosexual son, are victims of the repressive heteronormative ideology. But perhaps a different reader will fill in this implied ellipsis with a more positive message, one with hope for June’s future.

### Chapter 3: Jerome Caja's Abject Ascension

Introduction:

“I respect people who exaggerate disadvantages and turn them into a style”

— John Waters<sup>21</sup>

In 1996, when *Jerome: After the Pageant* was released, I was working in A Different Light Bookstore, an LGBTQ bookstore —now defunct<sup>22</sup>— on Castro Street in San Francisco. *After the Pageant* is Thomas Avena and Adam Klein's posthumously published monograph of queer artist Jerome Caja (1958-1996). I knew of Jerome, as I had seen him in nightclubs and at street fairs, and at that time the bookstore sold some San Francisco postcards<sup>23</sup> featuring photographs of Jerome, but I didn't know her<sup>24</sup> personally nor was I familiar with his paintings and artistic practice. I have a nascent memory of seeing her at the Castro Street fair sometime in the early 1990s wearing plastic kielbasas on a rope as jewelry, but I did not know who he was at the time. I also saw her perform once at a warehouse party when I was a teenager. Those memories came back to me when I first looked through *After the Pageant*, inspiring a “that's who that was!” reaction. To me, as a young gay man, he was a symbol of San Francisco's queer excess and defiance, a representative figure of a “Queer Fuck You,” something that I now reflexively see as a countercultural queer zeitgeist deeply imbricated with societal responses to AIDS, the

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<sup>21</sup> John Waters has made similar statements, several times. However, this quote was taken from a conversation between John Waters and John G. Ives, in the book *John Waters* by John G. Ives, published by Thunder's Mouth Press in New York, 1992. The quote can be found on page 69.

<sup>22</sup> The location is now home to Fabulosa Books.

<sup>23</sup> These were postcards featuring the photography of Rink, a San Francisco based photographer.

<sup>24</sup> A note on pronouns. Jerome died prior to the normalization of they/them pronouns being used by nonbinary folk. In fact, Jerome died before nonbinary became a common gender identity category. In his life, Jerome identified with the terms “fag,” “tranny,” and “queer,” all pejoratives at the time. Using they/them would seem both anachronistic, and presumptive of me. In recordings of Jerome, she moves back and forth between he/him and she/her, so that is what I will do for the duration of this chapter.

prevalence of mainstream homophobia at the time, and AIDS activism. I was young then, and working in this LGBTQ bookstore was an opportunity for me to immerse myself in the lexicon of queer countercultural productions.

From the day that *Jerome: After the Pageant* arrived in the bookstore, people filed in to purchase their copies of the book. I saw folks sharing stories of Jerome as they leafed through the book and stood in line to purchase a copy. To me, behind the counter, it felt ritualistic; it was almost like an extended queer funeral rite.<sup>25</sup> People weren't crying, or reverent per se, but they exhibited the hardened acerbic sense of loss so characteristic of a generation traumatized by AIDS-related death, one marked by a witty, irreverent style of mourning, peppered with reminiscences of scandalous behavior, crazy outfits, wild nights, and defiance.

Years later, while studying in Thailand, I learned about หนังสืออนุสรณ์งานศพ [nangsū anuson ngansop\ funeral memory books, sometimes called cremation books], a funereal tradition which started in Thailand shortly after the arrival of the first printing presses in 1835 (Ehrlich). Funeral memory books generally contain “a short biography of the deceased, eulogies from friends and relatives... and selected essays or pieces of prose and literature” (Olson 284). Grant Olson also points out that the inclusion of favorite poems and stories serves an intended cultural purpose: “By republishing long-out-of-print material many [funeral memory books] were intended as a contribution to the preservation of Thai literature” (284). In addition, funeral memory books often contain personal writing and recipes, which food historians and chefs have taken advantage of to resurrect traditional dishes and rural recipes, even in Michelin star restaurants (Ma). The

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<sup>25</sup> Jerome's official memorial took place at The Hole in the Wall Saloon (in its former location on 8<sup>th</sup> street).

funeral memory book acts as a purposeful conduit of cultural transmission, in addition to commemorating the life and work of the deceased.

Looking back, this is how I received Jerome, through the conduit of something akin to a funeral memory book, a posthumously produced artist monograph, composed of elegiac essays on Jerome's life and work, as well as color plates of several of Jerome's paintings, photos of Jerome performing in drag, and painting in her studio. I remember feeling cheated in 1996 that I hadn't become aware of the full scope of Jerome's work until after his death, but this feeling of missed opportunities due to death was commonplace as a young gay man in the early-to-mid-nineties; our "elders" — Jerome was only 37 when she died — were dropping like flies. And yet, *Jerome: After the Pageant* was a tangible connection to the largely diminished generation before mine, and I recognized this monograph as a valuable asset, through which I could learn about not only Jerome, but also the disappearing lifestyle and the culture that the LGBT+ generation before mine produced. Monographs and art books dedicated to the work of artists who died of AIDS serve a purpose as repositories and transmitters of culture in addition to representations of individuals' artistic productions.

This chapter focuses on Jerome Caja, a genderfuck drag queen, performance artist and figurative painter, who died from AIDS related complications in 1995. After Jerome's death, the artist Rex Ray created reliquaries containing Jerome's ashes, furthering Jerome's saintly representation already established by his performance and self-figuring in his paintings as a queer saint and messiah. This literal queer canonization exists in the realm of the implausible, where heresy begets the sacred, and camp leads to reverence. In what follows, I will theorize Jerome and her significance in his own terms, as a Queer Saint. I will begin with an introduction to Jerome's life and work, which I am calling a Golden Legend, as it is a hagiographic narrative



leading up to her death and canonization. I follow this with a genealogy of academic writings on Queer Saints and Medieval Saint Studies to illustrate the affective nature of patron/saint relationships, and to propose that canonization is a cultural phenomenon in which the abject erupts from the margins of society driven by identification and desire. Finally, I will discuss Jerome's *Ascension of the Drag Queen* (1994), one of his final paintings, and a literal depiction of her ascension to saintly iconicity.

#### Part I: Golden Legend

*"Jerome, what would you renounce for sainthood?"*

*"Everything."*

*"You'd give up sex?"*

*"Everything."*

*"Your Painting?"*

*"Everything."*

*"Your eyesight?"*

*"Everything...See, you can only be a saint when you're dead."*

*"The Beatification of Jerome,"* Thomas Avena.<sup>26</sup>

Thomas Avena and Adam Klein's 1996 monograph of queer artist Jerome Caja, *Jerome: After the Pageant*—published one year after Jerome's death—culminates with the dialogue above, "The Beatification of Jerome," a short exchange between Avena and Jerome. In the end, Jerome did give up sex, painting, his eyesight—due to Cytomegalovirus (CMV) Retinitis, a common AIDS-related illness that Jerome shared with her friend and muse, the artist Charles

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas Avena's "The Leveling," the culminating essay in *Jerome: After the Pageant*, ends with this dialogue.

Sexton—when, on November third, 1995, at the age of 37, Jerome died, making him eligible for sainthood (Corpora n.p.).

Jerome Caja, usually referred to just by her given name,<sup>27</sup> was born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio. After completion of his Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) at Cleveland State University in 1984, he moved to San Francisco to attend the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) program at San Francisco Art Institute, where she rose to notoriety as a nightclub performer and artist.

Jerome's artistic practice defies easy categorization; he was a painter, sculptor, drag queen, performance artist, photographer's muse, and nightclub performer. Jerome was an icon of many queer countercultural movements in late-eighties and early-nineties San Francisco, including the apocalyptic drag and eroticism of institutions like Club Uranus and Club Screw, and the anarchic defiance of the homocore/queercore movement. Jerome also participated in underground HIV activism, like the high-heeled wrestling events organized by ACT-UP San Francisco to fund Prevention Point, a then illegal needle exchange program at the forefront of harm reduction. Jerome's iconicity is its own archive,<sup>28</sup> by which I mean that her iconicity forms through accretion, and his image becomes a metonymic emblem through which various late-eighties early-nineties movements in San Francisco can be accessed. For example: Jerome was a cover girl for the *Homocore Zine*,<sup>29</sup> one of the first Queer zines and an impetus for and archive of the Queercore movement; Jerome was the co-hostess for Club Uranus, and one of the primary go-go dancers, so archival photos of the club often feature Jerome; she was also the subject of

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<sup>27</sup> Due to Jerome's preference as an artist to go by his given name, rather than following conventions of referring to the artist simply by their family name, I will refer to him as Jerome throughout this chapter.

<sup>28</sup> I would like to thank Jeanne Scheper for suggesting this terminology.

<sup>29</sup> You can see digitized issues of *Homocore* at Tom Jennings's website, one of the co-editors of the zine. This *Homocore* archive has been preserved by the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine. Jerome is on the cover of issue #4: <https://web.archive.org/web/20120320015717/http://wps.com/archives/HOMOCORE/>

many photographers,<sup>30</sup> including well known portraits by Charles Gatewood, who documented alternative culture, and Catherine Opie.<sup>31</sup> There is a condensation in Jerome's iconicity, wherein his iconicity stands for several associations, that transmits so much about late-eighties and early-nineties queer counterculture in San Francisco that Jerome's iconicity becomes an access point for countercultural and queer history.

Jerome's distinct look harnessed the social energy of Radical Drag and Genderfuck, most commonly associated with Divine and the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, the Cockettes, and the Angels of Light, respectively.<sup>32</sup> Susan Stryker writes "Radical 'genderfuck' groups like the Cockettes, the Angels of Light, and the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence offered another, more playful, approach to resisting the coerciveness of the gender system" (59). As a drag queen, Jerome's looks varied, but several recurring motifs defined his drag aesthetic. These included exposed lingerie, generally consisting of a small bra that went unstuffed — exhibiting her flat chest—thigh-high stockings—often fishnets—and, at least in his paintings, an unconcealed penis. This characteristic interpretation of drag is demonstrated in several of Jerome's paintings, such as "The Birth of Venus in Cleveland" (1988),<sup>33</sup> which depicts Jerome in a suburban

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<sup>30</sup> Some other photographers with images of Jerome include Daniel Nicoletta, Marc Gellar, Rick Gerharter, Jessica Tanzer, Rink, and Jim James.

<sup>31</sup> Catherine Opie's photographs of Jerome Caja have been shown widely, and are in the collections of several museums, including The Hammer Museum in Los Angeles (<https://hammer.ucla.edu/collections/ucla-artists-in-the-hammer-museum-collections/art/jerome-caja>) and the Santa Barbara Museum of Art (<https://collections.sbma.net/objects/22309/jerome-caja>).

<sup>32</sup> Both Radical Drag and Genderfuck can be traced back to the late nineteen-sixties and both can be thought of as oppositional or antagonistic aesthetic movements associated with gay and lesbian counterculture, but they differ slightly in their approach. While Radical Drag defies capitalistic, normative constructions of gender aesthetics, eschewing hegemonic conceptions of beauty, Genderfuck seeks to dismantle and interrogate social conventions of gender identity, either through androgyny or gender-blending, such as the Cockettes' distinct look of beards, heavy eye-makeup and gowns. These distinctions, of course, can sometimes collapse into each other, with Genderfuck sometimes being subsumed into Radical Drag as a more blanket term for transgressive and politically conscious drag.

<sup>33</sup> You can see "The Birth of Venus in Cleveland" and several other works on the digital Jerome Caja gallery, made available by *Visual AIDS*. <https://visualaids.org/artists/jerome-caja>

Cleveland backyard, standing in what appears to be a child's plastic pool, with long blonde hair, black opera gloves, thigh-high fishnets, a bra, and an uncovered penis. A small *putto*—a winged infant that often represents angelic spirits—flies nearby in attendance, preparing to drape Jerome in a red cloth, while the other side of the cloth is held by a demonic looking creature. This painting is in reference to Sandro Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus" (c. 1486 CE), which depicts a nude Venus on a half-shell emerging from the sea as an innocent, while a maiden approaches to clothe her. This renders Jerome's choice of attire in "The Birth of Venus in Cleveland" akin to the nudity of innocence, as if being adorned in a combination of female undergarments, with an exposed penis, is her natural, innocent state. Through this painting, Jerome creates a mythicized origin to his gender ambiguity, self-constructing a hagiographic fable of her birth and life prior to San Francisco. Additionally, the term "birth" connotes an entrance into life, as if an essential "true self" is being born here in this scene, appealing to an essentialist conception of non-normative gender and sexuality as something that lies hidden in the core of one's self, just waiting to get out. At the same time, the female undergarments indicate the constructed nature of this "true self" that is being born here, collapsing essentialist conceptions of self with a constructivist self-structuring. As Diana Fuss has argued, "the bar between essentialism and constructionism is by no means as solid and unassailable as advocates of both sides assume it to be" (xii).

Jerome was a second-generation Czech-American who grew up in Cleveland, home to one of the largest Czech-American communities in the country (Corpora). This means that her grandparents most likely immigrated to the U.S.A. during "the largest wave of Czech migration [which] occurred between 1870 and World War I, prompted primarily by economic conditions in the homeland, where employment opportunities were meager, incomes low, and taxes

intolerable” (Zentos & Marley). When settling in the United States, a rift developed in the Czech American community, which, to some degree, persists today. Upon arrival in the U.S.A., “they [Czech immigrants] were almost all [Roman] Catholics, but the possibility of being whatever they liked was stimulating,” and, at the time that Thomas Paine’s *Age of Reason* was translated into “Bohemian” [the common name for the Czech people and their language around the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century], according to Eleanor Ledbetter, “the Czechs of America were divided into two camps, those who remained faithful to the church, and those who professed an absolute denial of all religion” (17-19). What Ledbetter is pointing out here—and I must note that Ledbetter’s *The Czechs of Cleveland* was published in 1919—is that the Czech community in the U.S.A. is divided at its core along ideological/religious lines. Within this context, Jerome was born into a Catholic Czech family. It is important to understand the community that Jerome grew up in, and how his family’s Catholicism would have made them a religious minority within an ethnic minority, emphasizing the significance of Catholicism in her cultural identity. Bryan R. Monte, a childhood neighbor and friend of Jerome, writes that the Caja family was “one of the most well-known and devout families” in their parish, and very active in the Church community.

The art conservator Will Shank writes; “to enter Jerome's paintings is to be transported into the world of the artist's naked desires and fantasies, coupled with an anti-clerical irreverence that turns Roman Catholic iconography inside out.” Seen in this light, one comes to understand Jerome’s work as not necessarily sacrilegious, although many might take this perspective, but revisionist. It doesn’t attempt to destroy, or de-signify, Catholic iconography or saints’ stories, but rather to remold, or repurpose them. Kevin Starr, a historian of California, when asked to comment on the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence in 1982, defends religious parody as rooted in

historical responses to the Church as an institution; “I find the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence a totally understandable phenomena both from the point of view of the ancient art of religious parody and from the perspective of guerilla theater, a venerable genre of social activism.”

Saint Lucy figures prominently in Jerome’s body of work, with several paintings based on one version of her story in which she plucks out her own eyes “because they were subject to male desire” (Avena 82). Jerome’s work, such as “The Holy Spirit Getting New Eyes for Saint Lucy” (1991) and “New Eyes for Saint Lucy (tip tray)” (1994), is based on Lucy’s eyes being returned to her. In “The Holy Spirit Getting New Eyes for Saint Lucy,” a bird with breasts contemplates which of two sets of eyes it will select for Saint Lucy, while in “New Eyes for Saint Lucy (tip tray),” the bird-like holy spirit presents an eyeless Saint Lucy with new eyes on a tray, while a group of men surrounding her look on.

The significance of Saint Lucy and the Holy Spirit, in the form of a bird, returning her eyes, can be read with a dual implication. First, we could read the import of Saint Lucy’s presence as due to her role as the patron saint of eye health. Charles Sexton, who died in January of 1991 (Klein “The New Eyes” 132), lost his eyesight due to CMV Retinitis shortly before his assisted suicide, not long before the painting of “The Holy Spirit Getting New Eyes for Saint Lucy,” and Jerome lost his eyesight to CMV Retinitis as well, which would have been occurring slowly throughout 1994, the same year she painted “New Eyes for Saint Lucy (tip tray).” However, it would be a mistake to take these paintings as only referencing a desire to see again. Jerome took his failing eyesight with her characteristic optimism. Avena relays a conversation with Jerome regarding CMV Retinitis; “at dinner one day Jerome abruptly remarks, ‘Charles was very melodramatic. He talked about CMV as “the horror. The horror of darkening.” But it’s not like that at all. It’s like looking into the sun...’” (90). Saint Lucy’s eyes were considered

beautiful, which made her attractive to men, so the act of plucking out her own eyes was based on the guilt she felt over inspiring male sexual desires. And so, another possible reading of Saint Lucy's significance in Jerome's work is a re-envisioning of Lucy's story, one in which the Holy Spirit returns her eyes, signifying a return to sensuality, and an authorization of the desiring gaze; Saint Lucy should be allowed to revel in her desirability. This is just one example of Jerome's tendency to imbue the physical with sanctity.

Jerome is re-appropriating and reconfiguring the hagiography and iconography to advocate for the embrace of (queer) sensuality. Jerome's reformulation of the hagiography establishes a golden legend in which she himself is incorporated, not only as the holy spirit, but as a complex icon structured from several symbolic representations of self; sometimes Jerome is Venus, Jesus, the fruit bowl, and in the painting she made after his HIV+ diagnosis, "Bozo Fucks Death" (1988), Jerome is a skeleton wearing lipstick, acting as the receptive partner in anal sex with a man in clown makeup. In this sense, Jerome's work, saintly expression, and iconography could be considered as not necessarily melding two traditions, beliefs or ideologies—which is referred to as religious syncretism—but as disassembling elements of religious iconography so that they can be reassembled into a new structure, one that authorizes queerness and sensuality. In other words, Jerome used elements of religious iconography as building blocks, which can be structured into a queer golden legend that breaks down the divide between the spiritual (revered) and the physical (fallen) in order to authorize earthly pleasure.

As stated previously, Jerome was born into a large family in Ohio—Jerome had ten brothers—and she was raised Catholic, with a Catholic School education (Corpora). After high school, Jerome had a dual coming out, as gay and born again. According to Craig M. Corpora, "the apparent dichotomy between his religious and sexual identities was helpful in taking his

mind off himself.” Jerome continued his religious education after high school by working closely with nuns, as their volunteer arts and crafts instructor (Corpora). And, according to Monte, at one point Jerome was a seminarian on the path to becoming a priest. Monte writes that, in the autumn of 1982, his mother sent him a clipping from “one of Cleveland’s daily newspapers” with a photo of Jerome “as a seminarian with shoulder-length, blond hair surrounded by a group of adoring, but troubled, inner-city youth.” Monte is not necessarily surprised by Jerome being a seminarian, as the Caja family was very devout, and Monte had always perceived Jerome as someone who enjoyed the spotlight. However, Monte is surprised by Jerome’s appearance in the photo; “looking at [Jerome’s] wavy, androgenous, shoulder-length hair...I wondered if the Catholic Church had become more liberal or just desperate for new priests. Surely that hair made [Jerome] look unmistakably gay.” Monte thus emphasizes the incongruity between the priesthood and Jerome’s gender representation, and assumed sexuality (Monte did not know Jerome’s sexuality for sure at this time, but had made assumptions from an early age).

Jerome’s tendency to paint on found objects, with media such as liquid eyeliner, nail-polish, glitter, and white-out, mixed with more traditional media such as gouache and acrylic, might lead one to label her as an outsider artist, but, as Jerome received both a BFA and an MFA, one can draw the conclusion that Jerome’s work connotes the classification of outsider art strategically. The curator and writer Klaus Kertess writes; “the cosmetics meant to glamorize and/or erase have had their purposes inverted and now reveal, instead of conceal, the cruelties that mortality imposes on our flesh and its desires” (7). While Will Shank points out;

The paintings are outrageous and sometimes cartoonish, but Jerome was no naive painter.

Art-historical references abound; besides Bosch and Bruegel, and the obvious Spanish



and Italian floating saints, there is Goya. Jerome's "Charles Devouring Himself" is a reworking of Goya's "Saturn Devouring One of His Children" at the Prado.

Adam Klein's "The New Eyes" narrates the story of "Charles Devouring Himself," executed after the death of Charles Sexton. Jerome and Charles had an agreement that the ashes of whoever died first would be used in the other's paintings. Klein, quoting Jerome, writes; "Charles really pushed the ashes idea. He loved the idea of being spread out around the country. So now, with the ashes I have left, I can sell her, make her work for a living" ("The New Eyes" 122). "Charles Devouring Himself" is one of several portraits of Charles integrating his ashes into the medium—and exhibited at the show "The Remains of the Day" at Southern Exposure Gallery—which were eventually given away to Charles' friends and family, but, as Jerome states, the ashes he had left after this were incorporated into several paintings, to be sold (Klein "The New Eyes" 121).

Not only did Jerome incorporate human ash into his work, but toenails, hair-clippings, bloodied bandages from HIV tests, and used condoms found their way into her work as well. The use of these elements associated with the human body elicits an abject response in the viewer, as these bodily elements remind the viewer of their own body's inevitable decomposition and return to matter, making much of Jerome's work act as *memento mori*. The incorporation of bodily elements in Jerome's paintings challenges a conception of mind/body dualism in their corporeality, reminding us of Jerome's embrace of physical pleasure. There is a grotesque nature in the figurative representations mixed with detritus of the human body. Mikhail Bakhtin writes; "The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of the earth and

the body in their indissoluble unity” (19-20). Jerome’s work deploys the abject to degrade the spiritual to the physical, which in turn saturates the physical with the reverence of the spiritual.

However, the use of bodily elements also connotes a tradition of Sympathetic Magic, specifically, the branch of Sympathetic Magic named Contagious Magic by Sir James George Frazer in *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1890). Frazer writes; “the logical basis of Contagious Magic...is a material medium of some sort which, like the ether of modern physics, is assumed to unite distant objects and to convey impressions from one to the other” (170). Albeit, contagious magic is usually used to exert some sort of power over the individual whose body parts a sorcerer is in possession of, one can think of the concept conversely as a way to maintain a connection to the departed. In this sense, Jerome’s work can be seen as a conduit, bringing an aspect of the deceased to wherever the paintings are dispersed, casting his work as reliquaries or amulets capable of conjuring or invoking the departed and establishing a link between the material and spiritual.

Besides images of known saints, herself, and Charles, Jerome’s work is inhabited by figures such as the Clown, the Drag Queen, the Fruit Bowl (symbolizing the homosexual), the Hermaphrodite, and Jesus. Jerome asserts that the Bozo in his work is a universal man. Discussing “Bozo Fucks Death,” Jerome states; “the Bozo head gives this piece anonymity...It could be anybody. If it’s nobody in particular, *it becomes more universal*” (Avena 83). “So you identify with the skeleton?” asks Thomas Avena, to which Jerome replies, “yes...I’m a hole. I like to be filled...” (Avena 83). The large, lipstick covered smile on the skeleton’s face, as he bends over and receives Bozo’s penis from behind, belies the societal conception of male penetration as degrading, while Jerome’s self-representation in the painting as a skeleton reframes the theorized linkage between homosexual sex and the death drive as pleasurable. The

smiling, lipstick adorned and markedly male skeleton demonstrates pleasure in penetration, contradicting the patriarchal conception of sex. As noted by Foucault, in his discussion of Ancient Greek sexuality in *The Use of Pleasure; The History of Sexuality Volume 2* (1985); “in sexual behavior there was one role that was intrinsically honorable and valorized without question: the one that consisted in being active, in dominating, in penetrating, in asserting one’s superiority” (215). However, this traditionally “valorized” position in “Bozo Fucks Death” is literally occupied by a clown, a decidedly non-valorized figure.

Additionally, we must not forget that “Bozo Fucks Death” is the painting Jerome made after her HIV+ diagnosis, as mentioned above. Leo Bersani reminds us that “the public discourse about homosexuals since the AIDS crisis began has a startling resemblance...to the representation of female prostitutes in the nineteenth century,” which Bersani sees as wrapped up in “male fantasies about women’s multiple orgasms,” leading to the societal perception of “women and gay men [who] spread their legs with an unquenchable appetite for destruction” (211). Jerome inhabits this negative perception of homosexual receptive anal intercourse (through figuring himself as a skeleton) and rejects formulations of sex negativity (through the unmistakable smile of joy on the skeleton’s face). Despite the fact that Jerome is responding to her HIV+ diagnosis, he represents his skeleton-self as enjoying the penetration that may have infected him.

Jerome often painted himself as Jesus, as seen in “Sacred Heart Circle Jerk” (1990). Adam Klein writes; “Christ’s penis is surprising; painted toward the bottom of the image, it is easily overlooked. At the same time that Jerome returns religious iconography to the senses, he highlights the sexual as a covert act” (*Jerome: After the Pageant* 21). In the painting, Jerome stands in the middle of a circle of men, with her penis exposed. Jerome has the altruistic and

compassionate expression of Jesus on his face, while the surrounding men appear older than Jerome/Jesus, and are not depicted as traditionally handsome. The painting is all in tones of black and white, except the vibrant red shirt worn by Jerome/Jesus. I propose a reading of this painting that differs from Klein's, one in which Christ's compassion is linked to Jerome's sexuality, reinterpreting what some may label promiscuity as compassion, and indiscriminate sex as a manifestation of a divine love for humanity. The juxtaposition of the sacred heart, a symbol of Christ's love for all humanity and willingness for self-sacrifice, with the generally anonymous act of a circle-jerk, sacralizes promiscuity and public sex as divine forms of giving-of-oneself; Jesus's sacred heart becomes Jerome's sacred cock, shared indiscriminately.

Jerome also performed as Jesus, as she did on a Good Friday at Club Screw, sometime in the early nineties; "Jerome re-enacted the Passion story, complete with crucifixion and resurrection from a cardboard coffin" (Flanagan "Fond Memories"). During the crucifixion part of the performance, club-goers paid for the opportunity to take Polaroid photographs with him, billed as "Polaroids with Jesus". At this point, it would have been well known in the San Francisco queer countercultural scene that Jerome was HIV positive, making her mock crucifixion, and the display of (fake) blood, all the more poignant. In the Polaroid photos donated to The Jerome Project by Derek Boyle (figure 3.1), the picture in the foreground shows Derek and a friend in front of Jerome on the cross. Jerome has his legs up and wrapped around Derek, while Derek reaches an arm back towards Jerome's/Christ's penis. In the partially obscured photo behind this one, Derek has removed his shirt, can now be seen holding a drink, possibly a bottle of beer, and is leaning in for a kiss from the man next to him, while Jerome/Christ looms above, her arms open wide, fixed to the cross. Jerome is performing a symbolic representation of

Christ making the ultimate sacrifice for mankind, while drunken, homosexual hedonism occurs all around.



*Jerome's "Passion of Christ" Art Installation  
(Club Screw on Good Friday in San Francisco)  
Excerpted from: Flicker by Overdork  
Early 1990's*



*Polaroids of Jerome's "Passion of Christ"  
(Club Screw on Good Friday in San Francisco)  
Donated by: Derek Boyle  
Early 1990's*

### **Figure 3.1 Images from [thejeromeproject.com/provacatice-material.html](http://thejeromeproject.com/provacatice-material.html)**

After Jerome's death, the artist Rex Ray created acrylic reliquaries containing Jerome's ashes, which were distributed to close friends of Jerome (Cianciolo). Ray's project furthered Jerome's saintly representation already established by his performance, embodiment of the queer muse, and self-representation in artwork and performance as a saint, messiah, drag queen, or winged-fruit-bowl. Ray's numbered reliquaries are quite literally titled "Relic of the Saint," formalizing Saint Jerome's canonization. Jerome's canonization is enmeshed with her reception and artistic output, transmitting queer social energy into the future, and out of the era of the early AIDS epidemic. His embrace of earthly pleasures, including unashamed sexuality, was exceedingly impactful due to the widespread social stigmas against sexuality, homosexuality, and unchecked pursuits of physical pleasure at the time. Jerome's iconicity is a collaborative manifestation, in the sense that it is both a result of Jerome's self-structuring through his work,

and also an effect of social need. Ray's Jerome reliquary project was not directed by Jerome, but in conversation with Jerome's body of work and its residual social energy. Jerome's iconicity shines as a symbol of queer defiance, which becomes unmoored from his historic specificity yet never completely severed from it, imparting a defiant social energy on devotees. Jerome is a queer saint.

## Part 2: (Queer) Canonization: Abjection, Identification, Intimacy

At this point, I would like to clarify my usage of the term "Saint" that all too often commonly seems owned and controlled by the Church. Throughout this chapter, sainthood names a social phenomenon not limited to a Christian context and suggests various forms of affective relationships between living and dead humans. I do not give credence to the Church's purported authority over sainthood. This chapter examines the social elevation of individuals to saintly iconicity as a demotic form of spirituality. Historically, canonization has largely been demotic. Aviad M. Kleinberg shows that the papacy didn't take much of an interest in canonization until the twelfth century, and did not institute a regulated procedure for the authentication of saints until Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) declared that the task of verifying saints was "beyond untrained people's abilities" (*Prophets in Their Own Country* 26, 27). Saints are often those that engendered a following external to the systems of the Church, and therefore they were brought into the fold of sanctioned Church canon, subsumed due to an assumption that the hegemonic power of the Church may be threatened. These figures and their followers were often outliers who threatened the spiritual and ideological monopoly of the Church through diverting potential devotees and church adherents away from the sanctioned Church. If these saints were resistant or too radical to be brought into the power structure of the Church, they were vanquished by public denouncements and branded as heretical. Kleinberg points out that

“visionaries, seers, dreamers, hearers of voices, and prophets again and again appear in the ‘wrong’ places, in the margins of society, where they constantly seek detours to avoid the many roadblocks set up by the elite” (*Flesh Made Word* 4-5). Kleinberg illustrates the transgressive social energy often harnessed and transmitted by saints, who emerged in response to, or in opposition of, social hierarchies. In this way, hagiography is often imbued with a sense of defiance. In times of strife, devotees can look to saints, knowing that most saints were able to stay true to their convictions in the face of much more drastic oppression than the devotee is likely to be facing. The emergence of saints provides a more heterogeneous, diverse system of spirituality, which destabilizes hierarchical spiritual models of domination and dominion. There is also an affective nature to human relationships with saints insofar as the saint has an identificatory function. This is particularly true for minoritarian subjects that do not see themselves represented in history. Identifying with one’s patron-saint allows you to see and feel yourself represented in the past.

In my desire to advocate for the socio-cultural importance of Saint Jerome and the affective nature of patron-saint relationships with her, I don’t want to create a universal model for *The Saint* as an ahistorical constant as in doing so I would be falling prey to what José Esteban Muñoz refers to as “the lure of the universal” (“Feeling Brown, Feeling Down” 685). My analysis here deliberately ignores aspects of religiosity, such as a belief in the afterlife or a god, in favor of staying with the social, personal and affective interface with saints, and the circumstances which contribute to their canonization. Through my attention to context and affect I hope to offer a counterweight to the inevitable flattening effect of hagiography and saintly iconicity through which an individual’s life story is simplified and smoothed out. To understand the affective empowerment, identification, and kinship which Queer Saints offer to their

devotees we need to examine some attempts at explaining how these figures become elevated to saintly status. Thus, I will examine a genealogy of scholarly work on queer canonization in order to determine recurring motifs within saintly performance and reception, followed by examples of the queer affinity for saints and their stories. Finally, I will discuss the identificatory nature of patron-saint relationships. First, however, I would like to say something about my methodology.

My methodology could be characterized as what the field of New Historicism calls a poetics of culture, defined as the “study of the collective making of distinct cultural practices and inquiry into the relations among these practices” (Greenblatt 5). But through following David M. Halperin’s application of poetics of culture as “readily acknowledging the existence of transhistorical continuities” (*How to do the History of Homosexuality* 106) without falling into decontextualized and teleological arguments, I am acknowledging the desire for queer subjects to see themselves in history. At the same time, I am trying not to replicate or naturalize a social system that expels queer folk as abject. I see this desire to feel connected to history—and Halperin reminds us that “identification is desire” (*How to do the History of Homosexuality* 15)—as fundamental to the performance of saintliness, and the affective nature of the Queer Saint. Queer Saints, like medieval saints, are abject figures. Saints are models for self-fashioning, and thwart predestination. Through seeing what Saints were, and to some extents, still are, I can begin to see why Jerome has been demotically canonized.

In what follows, I will turn to two historians: Peter Brown, a historian of Late Antiquity known for his socio-cultural examinations of religious belief; and Kleinberg, who focuses on Late Antiquity up until the Reformation, and has argued for studying the social dimension of sainthood and saints’ stories. There is a history in Church authorized saint studies of attributing ascendance solely to an individual, rather than looking at how that individual has been received,



the social need behind that reception, the social energy harnessed in that reception, and the socio-cultural and historical context of the saint's life. Brown and Kleinberg, however, have advocated for a more holistic, contextually centered analysis of saints and those who express affinities for them. Kleinberg points out that most scholarly work on medieval sainthood relies on, or reinforces, a notion of what Max Weber labels charismatic authority, where "both success and failure of a charismatic can be explained solely in terms of the performer, his self-assurance and sense of mission, and not in terms of his audience... The audience, if we were to accept this notion of sainthood, does not determine the saintly performance, but merely reacts to it" (*Prophets in Their Own Country* 3-4).<sup>34</sup> The danger of a charismatic authority model is that, according to Kleinberg, "modern scholarship detaches the product (sainthood) from the labor that was needed to produce it as a social phenomenon" (*Prophets in Their Own Country*, 4-5). Failure to understand the canonization process as firmly entrenched in the socio-cultural conditions in which the saint lived creates an ahistorical, transcendent saint. Additionally, charisma is not a divine attribute, and not essential; charisma always has context. According to Kleinberg, "It is more useful, then, to regard not the saint, but the saintly situation—that situation where a person is labeled a saint and his or her behavior interpreted within the parameters of saintly performance—as the basic unit in the dynamics of sainthood" (*Prophets in Their Own Country* 7). Along with Brown and Kleinberg, I am taking the position that saints need to be studied from a perspective of social energy and social movements.

Two book-length studies that explicitly address Queer Canonization are *Saint Genet, Actor and Martyr* (1952) by Jean-Paul Sartre and *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*

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<sup>34</sup> See Max Weber "III: The Types of Authority and Imperative Co-ordination," in *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*.

(1995) by David M. Halperin. Sartre claims that Genet “never sides with the public prosecutor; he never speaks to us about the homosexual, about the thief, but always as a thief and as a homosexual,” and, in this sense, Genet “invents the homosexual subject” (587). In other words, the narrative of the good homosexual is always about repentance, and Genet refuses to act the part of the good homosexual. However, by defining the homosexual subject as in opposition to the law—“the public prosecutor”—Sartre sets up a social structure wherein the homosexual subject is always a subject position opposed to the law, and therefore outside of society, reifying the conditions of Genet’s social rejection and trauma in the first place. Additionally, Sartre points to Genet’s tendency to mythicize his autobiography, resulting in a hagiographic life story; “his [Genet’s] imagination is a corrosive operation that is practiced on the real, an operation aimed not at evading but at transcending reality, and... at dematerializing it” (14). Genet’s tendency toward self-mythicizing and his insistence on speaking from his abject position as a homosexual and a thief enacts his queer canonization.<sup>35</sup>

As for Foucault, Halperin points to two important aspects in the reception of his work that inspire a queer canonization. First, Halperin describes how Foucault’s conception of power inspired AIDS activists, particularly members of AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), resulting in a strong reverence for Foucault among politically and theoretically minded queers in North America during the eighties and nineties. Halperin claims that, while many on the left considered Foucault’s hypothesis of power as a relationship rather than a force to be a concept that foreclosed effective political opposition, queer political movements found the idea of power as a relationship inspiring (17, 16). Through the queer resistance movements of the eighties and

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<sup>35</sup> As an interesting aside, John Waters’ christening of his friend Harris Glenn Milstead as Divine was inspired by Genet’s *Our Lady of the Flowers*.

nineties, Foucault was “canonized as the founding spirit of a newly militant form of popular resistance,” which based its political practice on the belief that “*the aim of an oppositional politics is therefore not liberation but resistance*” (16,18 emphasis in the original). Secondly, Halperin claims that Foucault’s combination of critical analysis and political activism in his work and life provide LGBTQ+ intellectuals “a vehicle for intense personal identification” (14). Through Sartre and Halperin, the phenomenon of queer canonization is theorized in relation to a refusal to separate one’s work from one’s politics, intentionally operating under transgressive positioning (performing one’s abjection), a subject’s availability for intense identification by other queerly identified individuals, and a tendency to mythicize one’s own life (or through living a life that is easily mythicized).

Similar to Genet’s transgressive positioning, as analyzed by Sartre, Jerome represents herself as an abject figure, positioned at the boundary of social acceptability. This oppositional stance constructs Jerome as a locus of identification for those who have been made to feel as an “other,” such as those struggling with their gender identity and sexuality. Jerome’s embrace of physical pleasure and earthly delights while living with advanced HIV in the pre-cocktail period<sup>36</sup> authors the defiant and “perverse AIDS victim” while also refusing any moral imperative that had been socially affixed to the virus; i.e., Jerome inhabited the abject and performed that position, in turn adapting and self-authoring the abject image that had been projected upon him

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<sup>36</sup> The cocktail refers to Highly Active Anti-Retroviral Therapy (HAART), which combine two different nucleoside reverse-transcriptase inhibitors (NRTI) with a protease inhibitor. The cocktail, or HAART, became an officially recognised treatment in 1997, after two different studies published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*: Hammer et al. “A controlled trial of two nucleoside analogues plus indinavir...” and Gulick et al. “Treatment with indinavir, zidovudine, and lamivudine...”

Jerome was educated in Catholic schools and had an intense relationship to saints' stories and iconography from an early age. Adam Klein writes, "he [Jerome] once told me how when he was young the nuns stopped reading to him from *The Lives of the Saints*. They sensed he was enjoying it too much" (Avena & Klein 26). The affinity Jerome had for saints and saints' stories is identificatory, but it goes beyond that. Perhaps this enjoyment that the nuns supposedly detected relates to the fact that most saints are persecuted individuals who do not back down in the face of oppression. Klein points out:

Saints are usually just people at the wrong place at the wrong time. Jerome, in my last interview with him, began to list his favorites and provided a rapid-fire history of their bizarre behaviors and the political climates in which they suffered ....The saints he describes are eccentric, unwilling to or, more likely, incapable of compromising their visions; ultimately, they are transcendent examples of extreme perversity and religious renunciation. Their behaviors embarrass, terrify, and intrigue us. (Avena & Klein 25)

Similarly, the activist and writer Vince Sgambati writes of his childhood, "my closest friends became the sainted ghosts immortalized in paint or plaster or marble. And the more I heard or read about them and their lives and the people they cared for and loved ... the more I understood that there have always been outcasts relegated to the margins of society" (219). Many Christian saints were martyred in times of extreme persecution and oppression, enacting a resonating spirit of defiance; many Saints are abject figures who withstood extreme maltreatment due to a refusal to compromise themselves and conform. Jerome and Sgambati's attachments to saints demonstrate how the eccentricity and transgressive nature of saints and their stories function emblematically for young folk who feel like outsiders themselves, resulting in a queer affinity for saints and hagiography. But there is also an abreaction that can occur through affinities for

saints as an inversion of suffering, particularly when engaging with the hagiography that details the suffering saints faced. Brown claims that “often we go beyond identification to a form of emotional inversion” wherein “a torture that had once caused exquisite suffering is now the most apposite vehicle for relief” (84). Additionally, sometimes in reverence for a saint, the adherents are seeking a reversal of injustice. Kleinberg writes, “in many cultures those unjustly murdered are ascribed great powers. The injustice done to them creates a moral imbalance which the community corrects by empowering the victim... this belief transcends the boundaries of any specific religion” (*Prophets in Their Own Country*, 22). Brown and Kleinberg point out that part of the affect associated with a deep affinity for a saint is liberatory and empowering, in that the suffering of the saint is inverted in the devotee. Through the saint, abreaction of pain, abjection, suffering and rejection occurs. This inversion of suffering coupled with the desire inherent in identification moves us toward an understanding of the intense identification with saints by queer folk, and, as an aside, the desire for Saint Sebastian by many gay men. This intense identification is also a form of self-fashioning. Since the late antique period relationships with saints have been seen as a form of deliberate identity formation.

In late antiquity, Euro-Mediterranean culture understood the soul, or identity, as “a composite, consisting of many layers...thus, the self is a hierarchy, and its peak lies directly beneath the divine” (Brown 51). Prior to the rise of the cult of the saints, that barrier between the conscious self and the divine was inhabited by a protector, such as a daimon, genius, or guardian angel, which “was not only the constant companion of the individual; it was almost an upward extension of the individual,” (56) attached at birth. According to Brown, “the patron saint still has the ancient quality almost of an unconscious layer of the self” (56). However, where a patron saint differs from something like a daimon, genius or guardian angel is that the attachment of a

patron saint to an individual can *change* their identity. This is most commonly done through baptism and the adoption of a Christian name, which “link[s] the identity of the individual to a saint” (Brown 58). With this new linkage to a saint provided by baptism and the assignment of a Christian name, the belief was that the predestined personality associated with a child’s astrological sign is overridden (Brown 58). Brown claims, “Baptism cancelled the influence of the stars that had first formed the personality, by giving the initiate a new protecting spirit” (58). Brown argues that in swapping out an angel, daimon, genius, etc. for a saint as the occupier between self and the spiritual world, the spiritual intercessor is changed from a non-human entity to a dead human being. In doing so, one’s relationship with the divine lost the stability offered by a mythical entity whose sole purpose was to act as one’s divine intercessor and became modelled on unstable human relationships, such as the relationship between a patron and a client.<sup>37</sup> Following from this, Brown determines, “what has really changed throughout the Christian world is the late-classical sense of the stability of identity” (67). The identificatory affect of patron-saint relationships evidences the constructed nature of identity. Does this crisis of identity in the fourth century create a need for the cult of the saints, or is the rising cult of the saints and its ensuing destabilization of entrenched spiritual hierarchies the impetus for the crisis in identity? As with many epistemological shifts, we cannot attribute causality to one factor, but only mark correlation. However, Brown’s historiographic arguments lead me to wonder about the early period of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and how so many individuals lost to AIDS have become so revered as to have been elevated to saintly significance in the ensuing years, as the late-eighties and early-nineties could be characterized as a period in which there was a crisis of identity imbricated with HIV/AIDS stigma and queer activist militarization.

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<sup>37</sup> See “The Invisible Companion” in Peter Brown’s *The Cult of the Saints*.

Personally, I don't believe in an afterlife, heaven, nor a transcendent soul, and I have no idea what Jerome actually believed in regards to spirituality. But that doesn't really matter. As Kleinberg points out, "The sincere ecstatic and the successful imposter play exactly the same social role and belong in the same social category" (*Prophets in Their Own Country* 8). What matters here is how I feel enabled through my identification with Jerome, how my extreme affinity for Jerome and his death due to HIV/AIDS helps to heal me of the trauma of that era, in that her advocacy of physical pleasure severs ties with the morality attached to the HIV virus from its very identification. Maybe there is always a bit of perversity and nihilism in the reverence of abject individuals? In the medieval period, saints were an intercessor between the living human and the spiritual world; a saint was an intercessor between a living human and God. For me, I see Jerome as a portal through which I can access history. Through my reverence for Jerome, I can see myself in history, and hopefully I can begin to heal myself of history's traumas and elisions. In contributing to the cultural transmission of Jerome with this chapter, I hope to provide others a vehicle for identification, empowerment, and a connection to history.

The limits placed on queer cultural transmission by dominant society and the loss of tangible transgenerational conduits of queer counterculture are compounded by the loss of so many individuals to AIDS; amidst this loss, artists like Jerome — whose iconicity lingers after his death due to AIDS — take on a complicated social energy, with a resultant importance that cannot be reduced to "objective" aesthetic assessments of their artistic productions. Jerome's saintly affect is collaborative, in that her saintliness is an amalgamation of self-construction and social need, as evidenced by Rex Ray's Jerome Reliquaries mentioned above.

Cultural transmission is a tricky thing for queer folks. Most young folk questioning their sexuality do not receive valuable models of possibilities, culture, and alternative modes of

socialization and behavior through their biological/legal families. As Michael Warner reminds us; “queers do not have the institutions for common memory and generational transmissions around which straight culture is built” (51). Therefore, much queer acculturation has historically been sought out in counterpublics —like LGBTQ bars, nightclubs, cruising spaces, and bookstores like A Different Light. The large-scale decimation of these counterpublic sites of congregation and *contact*,<sup>38</sup> which have always been ephemeral, limits the possibility of LGBTQ acculturation, or, places it into the realm of the virtual, with social media and dating apps taking the place of physical counterpublics.

The loss of physical LGBTQ counterpublic spaces also leads to a loss of opportunities for transgenerational LGBTQ contact, which is very important to a cultural education, as LGBTQ “elders” have often accrued a considerable amount of cultural capital they can share with younger, or newly “out” LGBTQ folk. Additionally, there are other factors which inhibit queer transgenerational contact, including ageism, negative societal conceptions which unfairly compound homosexuality with pedophilia (consider the rise in LGBTQIA+ adults being accused of “grooming” for sharing their identities) resulting in a fear of statutory rape laws and transgenerational socialization, and societal conceptions of chrononormativity.<sup>39</sup> And of course, the large-scale devastation due to HIV/AIDS of an LGBTQ generation from the early-nineteen-

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<sup>38</sup> I use the term “contact” here very purposely, following from Samuel R. Delany’s conception of the word articulated in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999). Delany builds upon Jane Jacobs’s concept of “contact,” as discussed in her 1961 study *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Delany writes, “Jacobs describes contact as a fundamentally urban phenomenon and finds it necessary for everything from neighborhood safety to a general sense of social well-being” (126). Delany adds to Jacobs’s concept by considering “casual sex and public sexual relations as part of contact,” claiming “contact as a specifically stabilizing practice in interclass relations” (126, 127).

<sup>39</sup> Building upon Pierre Bourdieu and habitus, Evitar Zerubavel’s hidden rhythms, and Dana Luciano’s term chronobiopolitics, Elizabeth Freeman, in *Time Binds; Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010), coins the term chrononormativity, meaning “a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts” through “the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity,” wherein “naked flesh is bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation” (3).



eighties to the mid-nineties limited transgenerational contact in the LGBTQ counterpublics.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, those transgenerational exchanges which did occur—at least for me growing up in the East Bay of the San Francisco Bay Area and spending much of my time in San Francisco—were often inflected by AIDS. When these exchanges took place, there was an unspoken knowledge of mortality, the ephemeral present, and the social perception of gay men as deserving of death; transgenerational contacts between gay men in the late eighties and early nineties were often marked by fears of infection, an assumption of impending death, and an awareness that a section of society felt that gay men had brought the suffering of AIDS upon themselves with their “deviant” and “immoral” sexuality, and therefore should die; transgenerational queer contact was haunted by the specter of the virus, and homophobia.

With the limits placed on queer acculturation through the decimation of an LGBTQ generation due to AIDS and the loss of physical LGBTQ counterpublic sites, artists and public figures lost to AIDS gain a heightened importance; layered upon the quality of these individuals’ work, and the importance of their social, cultural and political interventions, is a social need to fill the void left behind, creating a reliance on these figures as conduits of cultural transmission. The imbricated nature of artists affected by AIDS, the dearth of queer cultural transmission, and the cultural capital linked to these artists, inspires a resultant iconicity. What I am trying to say here is that these deceased figures, taken away by AIDS in the early years of the epidemic, bear a certain responsibility, projected onto their cultural and social trace, which does not allow for their disappearance; we force these figures to haunt us, because we need them to.

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<sup>40</sup> HIV and AIDS management changed drastically after the publication of two studies, by Hammer et. al. and Gulick et. al, in *The New England Journal of Medicine* in 1997, which demonstrated the efficacy of combining two or more Nucleoside Reverse Transcriptase Inhibitors (NRTI). This type of treatment would come to be called “the Cocktail,” and greatly increased the life expectancy of those living with HIV.

In “Haunted Lives; AIDS and the Future of our Past,” Didier Eribon claims; “my life is haunted by those whom the disease took away—by those, more precisely, whom I managed to survive” (310). This haunting takes on a special significance with cultural producers, especially those whom death caused work to be interrupted, such as Eribon’s friend Michel Foucault, and his incomplete *History of Sexuality*. Eribon explains; “when I think about those who have passed away... I try to guess what path their work would have taken” (310). Sometimes artists also construct an intentional haunting, like Jerome and his structured iconicity, which culminated with Rex Ray’s Jerome reliquaries.

My affinity for, or devotion to Jerome started in A Different Light. Working there starting at the age of twenty meant I was surrounded by shining examples of queer transgression, on the walls, on the shelves, as much as in-person, with regular book talks, artist visits, and even with my coworkers as well (the staff included Terence Smith, A.K.A. Joan Jett Blakk, the artist Xylor Jane, and had previously included Justin Vivian Bond and Betty and Pansy, the publishers of *Severe Queer Review* city travel guides, just to name a few). But, my eyes were always drawn to the Rink photos of Jerome that we sold on postcards. I imagine that the feeling I had was similar to Jerome’s when in church as a child, surrounded by stained glass depictions of saints and martyrs. Monte describes Saint Clement Catholic Parish, the church Jerome grew up attending in Cleveland, just down the street from his family home, as a “dark, stained-glass windowed” church. Jerome, as an altar boy, would have been very familiar with the decorative elements of the church that Monte describes; “its clerestory walls had a mural of the saints’ gruesome martyrdoms—St. Clement, the parish’s patron, thrown off a ship with an anchor around his neck, St. Peter, crucified upside down, St. Lawrence, grilled over fire, St. Sebastian, shot full of arrows, Saint Hippolytus, pulled apart by horses, and St. Lucy (patron of the blind

and poorly-sighted), her eyes gouged out because a pagan man found them so beautiful he wanted to marry her.” Clearly these images stayed with Jerome, and fed his artistic practice, in which the saints “gruesome martyrdoms,” particularly that of Saint Lucy, are refigured. Similarly, the cultural productions, and producers, that I was exposed to at A Different Light have stayed with me. And, my ongoing fascination with Jerome has led me to a deeper historical knowledge of the period and countercultures I see him as representing. For example, reading about where Jerome exhibited his work in his lifetime has led me to explore the significance of Art Lick Gallery (1989-1992) and Kiki Gallery (1993-1995), two alternative gallery spaces in San Francisco where several queer and sex positive artists exhibited work in response to AIDS. Alternative art spaces such as this—that largely eschew the conventions of the “downtown” art market, and are formed with a political ideology—are an intrinsic aspect of queer counterculture of the nineties. Additionally, they speak to an economy and demographic of San Francisco that has been displaced by the influx of technology money from Silicon Valley.

Jerome’s paintings of Charles Sexton led me to explore other queer artists in Jerome’s network coming out of the San Francisco Art Institute in the late nineteen-eighties and early-nineties, such as Rex Ray. Other topics that Jerome opens up are the Homocore/Queercore movement, Club Uranus and Club Screw, and the political satire of Joan Jett Blakk, who ran for president of the United States in 1992 and 1996, as the Queer Nation candidate. In fact, Joan Jett Blakk interviewed Jerome for her local cable access talk show, *Late Night With Joan Jett Blakk*.

When a queer saint is seen as a portal to the queer past and repressed histories, it becomes obvious that the iconicity of these figures is not only constructed by mourning for individual artists, but through mourning for a lost culture as well. Edmund White, in “The American Sublime: Living and Dying as an Artist,” points out;

What has prevailed after the demise of this splendid period [the pre-AIDS, and early AIDS epidemic period of the queer-arts world] is a new queer puritanism — the appearance of many gays who want to marry, to adopt, to blend in, and to become virtually suburban. In the arts an edginess, a quirkiness, even a violence has given away to stylistic blandness. ... A tackiness, a sort of steroid-injected sex-shop conformism, has replaced the old transgressiveness of gay art. (9-10)

Hyperbole aside, the trend that White is pointing out is recognizable now as homonormativity.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Valerie Traub and David Halperin, in “Beyond Gay Pride,” point out that in the post-Stonewall period, an inclination towards “affirmative histories of homosexuality” resulted in a devaluing and obscuring of “pre-Stonewall queer outlaws,” such as Radclyffe Hall, Jean Genet, Gertrude Stein, Liberace, and Leopold and Loeb, “whose criminality, pathology, sinfulness, flamboyance, brutality, homophobia, or sexual and gender deviance had made them inimical to the ethos of gay pride, repulsive to liberated, self-respecting lesbians and gay men of the post-Stonewall era” (7).

And yet, despite the post-Stonewall trends, queer transgression in the arts was revitalized in the nineties; Queer Culture of the early 1990s was all about the rejection of heteronormativity, the refusal to conform to social norms deemed irreparably heterosexual and heterosexist; it gravitated toward those figures whose mode of homosexual existence was premised on the impossibility of social acceptance and integration, and therefore on the impossibility of gay pride. (Halperin and Traub 7-8).

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<sup>41</sup> The term “homonormativity” was coined by Lisa Duggan, in her book *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, but is now in common usage. David Valentine, quoting Duggan, sums up homonormativity as “how politically conservative gay and lesbian scholars and activists explicitly vaunt the power of the liberalized market to achieve civil rights recognitions with a ‘politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them’” (Valentine, 240, citing Duggan, 50).

Jerome represents himself, in his art and performance, as just such a figure standing in opposition to social acceptance.<sup>42</sup> Jerome's historic significance imbibes the social energy of queer outlaws who came before, as well as the transgressive, anti-normative spirit of the queer counterculture of San Francisco in the late eighties and early nineties, which he has come to represent.<sup>43</sup>

Through this transgressive positioning, evident in Jerome's artistic practice, performance, and self-stylization, Jerome's defiance, although historically situated, resonates with his devotees, imparting a sense of confidence in one's defiance, much like one of his favorite saints, Saint Lucy. Saint Lucy was martyred during the Diocletianic Persecution, a period when the Roman Emperor Diocletian undertook the final and most extreme persecution of Christians. Lucy, a devout Christian who valued chastity and charity, was seen as incomprehensible to the pagan Romans when she decided to remain a virgin and donate her family's riches to the poor. However, Saint Lucy's abject defiance is accessible to devotees in differing situations of strife and persecution, much like Jerome. In addition to Jerome's historical significance, and the importance of queer folk being able to place themselves within history through an affinity for abject queer figures, Jerome also imparts a spirit of defiance in the face of homophobia, sex negativity, and persecution.

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<sup>42</sup> The subtext of these observations by White, Halperin and Traub is of course the articulation between LGBTQ artistic production and a political ebb and flow between a tenuous tolerance of and active aggression towards LGBTQ folk, as, it goes without saying, when discussing deliberate transgression, there must be something functioning as the locus of opposition; the catalyst of deliberate transgression is confident, or at least intentional, defiance.

<sup>43</sup> For a discussion of cultural transmission, social energy, and historic significance, see Stephen Greenblatt's "The Circulation of Social Energy" in *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*.

So, not only is a portal into history for folk with non-normative gender and sexuality expressions (or anyone else who identifies with them in different ways, for that matter, such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identifying with Divine as a fat woman), but their defiance leaves a trace, which is accessible to those who may need encouragement in facing a world that labels them as abject. Facing an exclusionary dominant narrative of history, Saint Jerome erupts from the margins in abject ascension.

### Part 3: Jerome's Ascension

Painted shortly before Jerome's death due to AIDS related complications, *The Ascension of the Drag Queen* (1994)<sup>44</sup> functions as the climax in the narrative arc of Jerome's self-portraiture and self-structured canonization. Preparing for his imminent death, Jerome and her friend Anna van der Muelen initiated what they referred to as an *infiltration* of the art world. Anna documented all of Jerome's paintings still in his possession on video tape, with Jerome explaining the significance of the imagery in each work.<sup>45</sup> Anna then helped to organize an oral history interview with the Smithsonian Institution's Archive of American Art and a donation of Jerome's personal papers, along with countless miniature paintings (there are literally hundreds of paintings in just one box). Finally, Jerome and Anna organized a donation of several important works in her oeuvre to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), including *The Ascension of the Drag Queen*. Jerome and Anna's use of the term "Infiltration" conjures a seeping in, similar to percolation. In fact, the earliest uses of "infiltration" in the English language are related to physics and geology and show how that which is penetrated or

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<sup>44</sup> You can see *The Ascension of the Drag Queen* (1994) as part of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's (SFMOMA) digitized collection here: [https://www.sfmoma.org/artist/Jerome\\_Caja/](https://www.sfmoma.org/artist/Jerome_Caja/)

<sup>45</sup> Jerome's plan of "infiltration" is explained in the video I have referenced here, which is held by the director and founder of The Jerome Project, Anthony Cianciola.

infused is changed or altered by the act of infiltration. And so, does Jerome's infiltration of the SFMOMA's permanent collection create change in the institution? The answer here is rather ambiguous and indefinable. What the use of this term *does* clearly indicate is that Jerome felt unrepresented by or like an outsider to the machinations of the institutionalized art world. Infiltration requires knowledge, and that knowledge is used for the purpose of subterfuge. Physical infiltration also requires some sort of likeness or compatibility (ability to enter and permeate; i.e., create change). Jerome did possess the knowledge necessary for his infiltration of the art world as she was a highly educated artist, holding a Master of Fine Arts from the San Francisco Art Institute. Jerome also had a high degree of knowledge in Catholic art, iconography, and hagiography.

Jerome's *Ascension* has all the elements of classic Ascension of Christ iconography. An Ascension icon is generally divided into two parts, showing heaven and earth, which also symbolize the spiritual and the physical. Christ is seen ascending from the physical to the spiritual realm, leaving his congregation behind in the physical plane of existence. The centerpiece, or axis of the composition in Ascension of Christ iconography, particularly in orthodox sects, is the Virgin Mary, Mother of God. She symbolizes the connection between heaven and earth. In Jerome's ascension, this space is occupied by a plucked chicken. Below the Virgin Mary is generally the apostles, which symbolize the congregation or body of the Church. In Jerome's *Ascension* the space for the apostles is occupied by a toaster. In Jerome's personal iconography the toaster represents hell on Earth,<sup>46</sup> but a toaster also conjures up ideas of domesticity and gendered ideas of the domestic space, which in turn suggest cultural

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<sup>46</sup> Jerome describes the toaster as a symbol for hell on Earth in the aforementioned video made by Jerome and Anna van der Muelen, which is held by Anthony Cianciola, director and founder of The Jerome Project.

representations of the gender binary. Christ is usually depicted making the symbol of benediction with his right hand as he ascends, which is a blessing of the church. Jerome depicts herself making a peace symbol with his right hand. In Christ's left hand is often the gospels or a scroll, symbolizing his teaching. Jerome carries a rose in his ascension, which in her symbolism stands for earthly or physical pleasures.<sup>47</sup> It is common in iconography for Christ to be aided in his ascension by angels, or in renaissance icons, putti. Jerome is aided in his ascension by Bozos. Most religious discussions of ascension icons note that Christ did not actually need the help of angels to ascend, because he was capable of doing that on his own, but that the angels merely symbolize his glory and veneration in heaven. Jerome's Glory is the clown; she is a prankster, a joker. Ascension iconography often includes two angels visiting the remaining apostles as they watch Christ ascend from the top of Mount Olive. They tell the apostles not to be sad, as Christ will return in the second coming. Jerome's ascension is witnessed by Charles Sexton,<sup>48</sup> as the devil, and a Mammy, in the place of the two angels. The Mammy is gazing as Jerome ascends, and she is holding an Aunt Jemima Waffles box. The Mammy is a racist archetype. She is used to create a revisionist history, or to erase suffering. A Mammy is usually a depiction of an older, overweight, enslaved Black woman, smiling and often carrying a bowl and wooden spoon. Filmic representations of the Mammy, such as Hattie McDaniel's portrayal of "Mammy" in *Gone with the Wind* (1939), are usually happy and very attached to the white children they are tasked with raising. The Mammy gives a false sense of the slave-owning era in the United States.

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<sup>47</sup> Jerome describes the rose as symbolizing Earthly or physical pleasures in the aforementioned video made by Jerome and Anna van der Muelen.

<sup>48</sup> The artist Charles Sexton was a close friend and colleague of Jerome's. When Charles died due to AIDS related complications, Jerome mixed his ashes into the media of several paintings. Many of these paintings were icons or portraits of Charles, and were displayed in the exhibition *The Remains of the Day* at Southern Exposure Gallery in 1992, one year after Charles' death. See Hallstead, Kate. "A Body of Work: Corporeal Materials, Presence, and Memory in Jerome Caja's Exhibition *Remains of the Day*." *What You Don't Know About AIDS Could Fill A Museum*, special issue of *On Curating*, no. 42, September 2019. 68-71.



Aunt Jemima (the name and character) comes from black face minstrelsy. She was a Mammy character often played by a white man in black face. The name was then used for branding the first pre-mixed pancake mix, around 1889. The first actress to play Aunt Jemima for the pancake company was Nancy Green, in 1890. She played the character as the brand's spokesperson until her death in 1923. She was a formerly enslaved person who was hired to perform a revisionist image of the enslaved women as happy and nurturing. The Mammy in Jerome's *Ascension* gazes at him knowingly. Jerome in this painting is clothed in a green, shiny dress that looks much more formal than the attire in any of her other self-portraits. And, surprisingly, Jerome's usually brown complexion—he was Czech American—is strangely white here. Jerome's self-depiction in *Ascension* seems sanitized, and the interplay between this whiter and more formal Jerome ascending and the Mammy angel with her Aunt Jemima Waffles warns of revisionist histories that smooth over oppression and suffering. Despite Jerome's self-constructed canonization and intentional infiltration of the institutionalized art world, Jerome seems to be warning us of the inevitable flattening and decontextualizing effect of canonization and institutionalization. Although Jerome desired both canonization and institutionalization, she reminds us that he is just a trickster advocating for earthly delights and physical pleasure, but that does not mean she is immune from cooptation and misrepresentation. To end, I want to point out that the desire to canonize and venerate queer icons, to identify with historical figures and feel enabled by them, comes from a real need specify]. However, we must not forget the context, nuance and ambiguities inherent in life. We must not forget that it took ten years of advocacy and protest for the New York Police Department to investigate the death of Marsha P. Johnson,<sup>49</sup> nor that Sylvia

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<sup>49</sup> See *The Life and Death of Marsha P. Johnson*, Dir. David France, 2017.

Rivera was rejected by the mainstream gay and lesbian liberation movement in her lifetime.<sup>50</sup>

And, we certainly must not forget that the Catholic Church, Jerome's artistic inspiration, was directly responsible for blocking public schools in the United States during the early part of the AIDS/HIV epidemic from teaching about safe sex, condoning homosexuality, or distributing condoms, and only allowed abstinence to be taught. We venerate these individuals for the way they dealt with the situations around them, and their stories need to be situated historically.

Remember, *charisma always has context*.

Conclusion:

Jerome's iconicity emerges from the totality of her work, which, along with his reception and transmission, coalesces into a saintly image, one that lives on well after her death. His distinct look, reputation, and visual art, are highly recognizable in queer countercultural circuits. Many photographers, including Catherine Opie, Daniel Nicoletta, and Charles Gatewood, just to name a few, have taken iconic photographs of Jerome. Additionally, when examining the archive of queer counterculture in the late eighties and early nineties, Jerome is bound to pop up in unexpected places; for example, as a cover girl for the *Homocore* zine, an important document of the queer hardcore scene of the late eighties and early nineties. The tenacity, or persistence, of Jerome's iconicity is also evidenced by the transmission of his image into the works of other artists, such as Scott Williams' painting based on Charles Gatewood's portrait of Jerome, or Ricky Sencion's several paintings of well-known photographs of Jerome.

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<sup>50</sup> See Rivera's speech, "Y'All Better Quiet Down Now," at the Christopher Street Liberation Day Rally in New York City on June 24, 1973, which was in response to mainstream/assimilationist, middle class, predominantly white gays and lesbians calling for the exclusion of drag queens and transwomen from the Gay Liberation Movement, and disallowing them from speaking at the rally.

Jerome's artistic practice became her life, and his lifestyle, particularly in the seven years between her HIV diagnosis and death. In that time, Jerome was able to create a saintly image of himself, one that goes beyond any medium, an image that is intangible, but persists, not just in the museums holding her work, but an image which is transmitted translocally, through queer communities, by word of mouth, and of course a digital presence. Jerome lives on, as an icon of the early AIDS era queer counter-culture, carnality without procreation, queer transgression, and radical self-definition in the face of abjection. In this sense, Jerome's iconicity represents a futurity, in that he has projected herself into the future through cultural transmission, harnessing the social energy of a counterpublic zeitgeist. Jerome's iconicity transmits a lost queer culture on into the future.

Although Jerome's work is situated in abjection and transgression, it doesn't correlate to common formulations of queer negativity. Eribon writes; "I would like to propose, against the idea of negativity, of temporality closed upon the present instant, of nonreproduction, the idea of a creativity, of an invention of one's self that rests upon the idea of a future, of the transmission of a legacy" (318). Jerome's legacy becomes mythicized through her canonization in the pantheon of queer saints.

And, inevitably, here as I enact a new cultural transmission of Jerome, I infuse his significance, past and present, with my own thoughts, dreams and ideologies, just as Thomas Avena and Adam Klein have done before me in *Jerome: After the Pageant*. By this I mean that Jerome's iconicity is inevitably inflected by my needs; what significance does Jerome hold for me? Additionally, as I am haunted by Jerome, he is also a part of me. Didier Eribon, building on the work of Gilles Deleuze, claims; "the self is constituted by that which the deceased have *deposited* within us" (310). This concept of subjectivation through mourning is of course not

specific to the queer community, nor to artists and AIDS, but Eribon claims that there is a certain distinction regarding AIDS and gay subjectivation; “I am sure...that there is a certain gay specificity in the community of the dead that was created by the disease whose ravages began spreading in the early 1980s, and this community of the dead haunts gay subjectivity today as well as the unconscious of all gay people” (310-311).

Jerome’s defiance was largely constructed while facing an inevitable abject death. However, in the heated political climate of the first fifteen years of the AIDS epidemic, when non-normative sexuality and gender expressions were often cast as ‘deviance’ deserving of the ravages of AIDS, Jerome refused to edit himself, her art, or his performance. While living in adversity, Jerome constructed her saintly image, through a queer alchemy of religious iconography, embodiment and performance of a saint and a messiah. Now, Jerome’s iconicity continues to be transmitted, invoking an elided queer history, and transmitting a spirit of queer defiance.

Queer canonization results from social need, a need for acculturation, and a linkage to a history that at best elides non-normative subjects and at worst vilifies them. The inability, or unwillingness to conform, even in the face of abjection, and sometimes death, imbues queer saints with an iconicity that shines like a beacon for those who do not see themselves in the historical record.

In 2016, Stacked Deck Press released *The Queer Heroes Coloring Book*, edited by Jon Macy and Tara Madison Avery. The coloring book features Jerome, drawn by Justin Hall, among many other queer heroes. In the final editor’s note, Avery writes; “For people in the LGBTQAI community who are from their youngest days ostracized, misunderstood, and subject to threat of violence by both their peers and those in positions of authority, knowing that there have been

people in this world who have faced the same odds or greater and overcome is an indispensable source of inspiration.” I would add to Avery’s words that the social energy imparted upon devotees by queer saints who faced strife and abjection, and did it in style, can also fortify our resolve to be defiant of our abjection and represent ourselves honestly in the face of oppression.

## Coda: Joan Jett Blakk and Queer Politics

On January 19, 1992, Joan Jett Blakk threw her wig into the ring<sup>51</sup> and announced her candidacy for President of the United States, officially entering national politics. This campaign followed her run for Mayor of Chicago in 1991. For both of these campaigns—or, as she referred to them, camp-aigns—she was representing Queer Nation, specifically the Chicago Chapter, of which Terence Alan Smith (Ms. Jett Blakk’s alter ego) was a founding member. According to Mark Stein, the fact that Jett Blakk was officially representing a political group sets her candidacy apart from other “fringe candidates”; “Unlike the many fringe candidates who nominate themselves, Joan Jett Blakk was asked to run by Queer Nation, a national LGBTQ activist group founded in 1990” (155). Joan Jett Blakk is the drag persona of artist and activist Terence Alan Smith. Her campaigns harnessed the social energy of the Theater of the Ridiculous, and political satire, and were born from a strong, earnest activist approach, with a well thought out, broad social justice platform.

Jett Blakk’s first camp-aign, for mayor of Chicago in 1991, was a political stunt for visibility orchestrated by Chicago’s chapter of Queer Nation. When Richard M. Daley was running his first (of many) reelection campaign, Queer Nation saw the potential for visibility by running a candidate. The local press coverage that this campaign generated inspired the Queer Nation chapter to vie for even more visibility, and it was decided that Jett Blakk would run for President of the United States, on the Queer Nation Party ticket, under the camp-aign motto “Lick Bush in ’92.” So, on her 35<sup>th</sup> birthday, Joan Jett Blakk announced her candidacy at a press

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<sup>51</sup> “I’m throwing my wig into the ring” was a phrase used by Joan Jett Blakk in her candidacy speech at Chicago’s Berlin nightclub on January 19, 1992.

conference, at Ann Sather's restaurant in Chicago. Following the press conference, Jett Blakk gave an official campaign declaration speech at Berlin nightclub.

Although Jett Blakk's official candidacy speech at Berlin is humorous, it also shows a progressive platform informed by a disavowal of the political system in the United States. After Ronald Reagan's name generates loud boos and hisses from the audience, Jett Blakk quips, "If a bad actor can be elected president, why not a good drag queen?" ("Joan Jett Blakk Announces Candidacy"). Blakk goes on to claim that she and her campaign are actually *not* ridiculous, but what is ridiculous is the state of American politics. After officially announcing her candidacy for the "orifice" of President of the United States, Jett Blakk declares;

You might think we're joking. Well, I'm sorry but, I think the fact that the U.S. is the only industrialized country without national healthcare is a joke. I think the fact that some guys with friends in high places got away with opening savings and loans that were designed to steal from hard working people, and survived with their testicles intact, is a joke. I think the fact that a woman who accuses a supreme court nominee of sexually harassing her was judged by a group of all men, one of them being Ted Kennedy, is a fucking joke. ("Joan Jett Blakk Announces Candidacy")

Jett Blakk is deploying what L.M. Bogad has referred to as Electoral Guerilla Theater; "With little intention of winning in the conventional sense, drag performers, anarchists, and others on the political margins execute their electoral campaigns using the aesthetics of camp, agit-prop theatre, and the stand-up routine to undermine the legitimacy of their opponents and sometimes the very electoral system in which they are operating" (2). Jett Blakk practiced a destabilizing combination of infiltration, or "event crashing," mixed with a friendly and sincere performance as a political candidate; this is direct-action camp. Some of the most effective of her direct-action

camp tactics were her attendance at the IMPACT Dinner, “crashing” Chicago’s Saint Patrick’s Day Parade, and the highest profile event she infiltrated, the 1992 Democratic National Convention.

IMPACT was a gay and lesbian lobbyist organization founded in Chicago in 1987. IMPACT hosted a yearly, black-tie event to socialize with, and influence, local politicians and political candidates. For the annual dinner on February 2, 1992 at the Chicago Hilton, Joan Jett Blakk was not on the guestlist, despite her presidential campaign. Jett Blakk’s exclusion from this political event demonstrates a rift between the anti-assimilationist politics of Queer Nation and the respectability politics of organizations such as IMPACT. Bruce Bawer, commenting on the Queer Nation Party’s camp-a-ign, complains that Jett Blakk “presents himself as a representative of the gay population [and] insists on playing the fool, the absurd outsider; the whole idea of gay politics, after all, should be to stop heterosexuals from thinking of gays as the most ‘other’ thing around” (39). However, adapting one’s identity and performance in order to vie for respectability was not the goal of Jett Blakk’s camp-a-ign, “the goal was to stretch, erode, or destroy the limits of respectability rather than try to be accepted within those limits” (Bogad, 138). In other words, Jett Blakk’s camp-a-ign is designed to expand the circle of inclusion rather than find inclusion within the smaller circle.

Despite Jett Blakk’s exclusion from the IMPACT dinner guest list, Jon-Henri Damski, a columnist, essayist, and activist well-known in the Chicago LGBT+ community since 1977, invited candidate Jett Blakk as his date. Jett Blakk showed up on the arm of her date, accompanied by bodyguards, “two stern-looking lesbians in black leather uniforms and ‘PROUD DYKE’ patches on their jackets,” and a Queer Nation video crew (Bogad 148). During the dinner, IMPACT’s Executive Director read off the names of the politicians and candidates



attending the dinner in order to secure the support of the LGBTQ+ community, but failed to include Jett Blakk in the list. This is something that Jett Blakk's campaign had anticipated and planned for; "at the end of all the introductions, the spotlight operator (whom Queer Nation had enlisted to the cause) turned his light onto Jett Blakk, who was sitting on the shoulders of her leather-dyke bodyguards, waving to the crowd" (Bogad 151). L.M. Bogad argues that this is an example of how "the Queer Nation crew was able to inject Jett Blakk's unwanted queerness...into the ceremony from which she had been excluded" (151). Bogad's contention here strikes a distinction between Jett Blakk's "queerness" and the lesbian and gay respectability politics of political organizations such as IMPACT. Using Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's distinctions between minoritizing and universalizing,<sup>52</sup> Bogad argues that Jett Blakk's queerness seeks a broader coalition than the respectability politics of assimilationist Gay and Lesbian approaches to politics; "Joan connected her queer politics with a broad social justice agenda. She wanted to link the fight against sexual regimes of the normal to the struggle against capitalism and oppression of all kinds, in a 'universalizing' effort, as opposed to a separatist, single-issue or 'minoritizing' discourse of protest" (132). Bogad aligns Jett Blakk's camp-aign with an intersectional approach to the political, while IMPACT's exclusion of Jett Blakk, and Bawer's complaints about her camp-aign, indicate a disjuncture between "Queer" and "Gay and Lesbian" that is predicated on a universalizing approach to the political as opposed to a minoritizing approach.

Jett Blakk and Queer Nation "crashed" the 1992 St. Patrick's Day Parade in Chicago, making Jett Blakk's camp-aign and Queer Nation the first openly gay organizations to participate

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<sup>52</sup> Sedgwick defines the "minoritizing" view of homosexuality and a homosexual politics as considering homosexuality as applying to a "small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority," whereas the "universalizing" view conceives of the homo/heterosexual binary "as an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across a spectrum of sexualities" (*Epistemology of the Closet*, 1). Sedgwick is not only suggesting a deconstruction of homosexuality through considering both *acts* and *identity*, but also leaning toward an intersectional understanding of sexuality as a spectrum amongst various other vectors of identification on their own spectrums.

in the St. Patrick's Day parade, something that other LGBTQIA+ groups had been trying to achieve for years in Chicago, New York and Boston. The Jett Blakk campaign didn't petition the parade or apply for a permit, rather they were invited by State Senator John Cullerton to take his spot in the parade, as he had decided not to march. This "crashing," like the campaign enlisting the spotlight operator at the IMPACT dinner, was an example of seeking detours to roadblocks set up by cultural gatekeepers. Skip Blumberg captured the Jett Blakk campaign contingent marching in the St. Patrick's Day Parade in a video titled "The 90's Election Specials Raw: St. Patrick's Day Parade." Blumberg approaches the contingent, letting them know from the start that he is a friendly interlocutor by approaching Joan and saying "finally, I see someone I can relate to" (52:10-52:13). The humor of this comment comes from the fact that Blumberg had just finished interviewing Hilary Clinton's brothers Tony and Hugh Rodman as they marched in support of Bill Clinton's campaign. Blumberg asks Joan; "So what are your chances of winning...?" To which Joan replies; "Oh, they're pretty good, if I can get everyone who's dissatisfied with the way things are going now, I think, don't you?" (52:23-52:31). Joan is laying claim to the dissatisfied and those that dissent in the electoral process, establishing her candidacy as representative of those that feel unrepresented. Blumberg captures the Queer Nation camera crew marching alongside the Jett Blakk campaign contingent, who are there with a dual purpose, to document the march but also to document any possible attacks against their contingent. And, as Blumberg pans to the public viewing the parade, you do see some men screaming "Boo! Get out of Here. You suck!" But, right next to them are people screaming "Yay! Joan Jett!" And, as Candidate Jett Blakk marches past a group of stern looking police officers, you can just hear one say "Great Legs!" (53:49-54:19). The variety of responses indicates that Jett Blakk's positive demeanor, interspersed with her sincere politics, allowed people to feel that they were in on the

joke while they were being confronted with her message. In fact, even the men yelling “Get out of here” are laughing while doing so, evidencing *a form of enjoyment*.

The highest profile act of infiltration in Jett Blakk’s 1992 campaign would be appearing on the floor of the 1992 Democratic National Convention at Madison Square Garden. The campaign partnered with the Gay Cable Network of New York, which was able to secure press passes for the convention, and the Limelight nightclub, which paid for Jett Blakk’s travel expenses and agreed to host a press conference. On the first day of the convention, 13<sup>th</sup> of July, 1992, Terence Smith showed up in drag, as “Joan,” and was denied entrance to the convention floor. So, she decided to make the most of it and attended several protests around the convention. At one of these protests Jett Blakk ran into Glenda Orgasm—the New York drag queen personality of Glenn Belverio—who, at the time, was the co-hostess of *The Brenda and Glenda Show*, a local Manhattan cable show. During the interview, Candidate Jett Blakk denounced the DNC as elitist. She also discussed the upcoming 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Columbus’s cross-Atlantic expedition as “a celebration of genocide and imperialism” (Bogad 152). While Glenda and Jett Blakk were speaking with protesters at a large feminist demonstration they were noticed by several TV and radio news crews, including the crew of WINS (A New York news radio station), who interviewed Jett Blakk for their DNC coverage. During this interview, “Joan continued to connect issues of class conflict with her queer politics and public persona” by discussing college debt, beauty ideals, the George H. W. Bush administration’s failure to properly address AIDS/HIV, and the right of all people to have access to healthcare (Bogad 158).

On the second day of the 1992 Democratic National Convention, “Terence” showed up, with the Gay Cable News and the Queer Nation press corp. They used the press passes secured by Gay Cable News, and this time were granted access to the floor of the convention. Terence

gave several interviews on the floor of the convention, complaining that he could not be in attendance as “Joan.” After a few hours of this, a visibly nervous Terence went into a men’s room, and “hastily put on his makeup, seven-inch platform heels, and the tight red, white and blue mini-dress he had been saving for the occasion” (Bogad 154). Joe E. Jeffreys noted in the journal he kept that day, that Jett Blakk’s drag had to be smuggled through security; “with what we came to call ‘the football’ (an official DNC press kit gutted to conceal his dress, makeup, shoes, and accessories)” (191). Once on the convention floor, Joan films a special announcement for Gay Cable News, has a quick interview with a reporter from *Newsweek*, then does a quick lap around the convention; “Joan hands out literature, scares the be-Jesus out of several seated delegates, and brings smiles to the faces of many another” (Jeffreys 193). After making it onto the convention floor in full Joan Jett Blakk attire, they return to Jeffreys home, who is hosting the delegation while they are in New York, to prepare for the press conference at the Limelight. Jeffreys notes in his journal;

Back at New York Joan Jett Blakk for President campaign headquarters—my apartment—we hear that something surprising is happening. Several delegates are casting their promised Clinton, Brown, or Tsongas votes for “other”...Miss Jett Blakk immediately lays claim to all “other” delegate votes stating that he was “clearly the only ‘other’ on that floor.” (194)

Claiming the delegate votes for “other” is in keeping with Jett Blakk’s campaign claims of representing the dissatisfied, and those that have given up belief in the United States political process. There is also an opportunistic identification with otherness here which humorously relies on Jett Blakk construing herself as included within the realm of possible Democratic presidential candidates rather than focusing on the exclusionary category of “the other.” The

story of Jett Blakk's 1992 presidential candidacy is the focus of Steppenwolf Theater's 2019 play *Ms. Blakk for President*, written by Tarell Alvin McCraney and Tina Landau, and directed by Landau.

After her 1992 campaign, Joan Jett Blakk relocated to San Francisco, where she ran for president again in 1996, but this time representing her own political party, The Black Pantsuit Party. In keeping with her claims of support from those that are dissatisfied, and vote "other," Jett Blakk announced that she had won the New Hampshire primary in 1996; "Jett Blakk's win in the New Hampshire primary is calculated based on the record number of registered voters who didn't go to the polls Tuesday in keeping with the candidate's strategy of getting something for nothing" ("Nelson Mandela Joins Presidential Candidate Joan Jett Blakk..."). In a press release for Jett Blakk's 1996 campaign, the "Committee to Erect Joan Jett Blakk" writes; "if voters continue to support Jett Blakk by not voting in record numbers as they did in Iowa and New Hampshire, expect the rest of the primaries to be a snap, Queen" ("Nelson Mandela Joins Presidential Candidate Joan Jett Blakk...").

Jett Blakk's drag politics found a welcome home in San Francisco, where there is a long history of drag queen candidates: José Sarria, then known as the Nightingale of Montgomery Street in Drag (more commonly known by the later name, The Widow Norton), ran for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1961, becoming the first openly gay candidate for public office in the United States; Sister Mary Boom Boom (Jack Fertig), a Sister of Perpetual Indulgence, ran for San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1982, and for Mayor of San Francisco against Dianne Feinstein in 1983; and Sister Sadie, Sadie, the Rabbi Lady (Gil Block), one of the founding members of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, ran for Concord City Council in 1991 as a protest against one Concord City Council Member's attempt to remove sexual orientation

from the city's anti-discrimination ordinance and end basic protections for people living with HIV/AIDS (Block 179).

I first met Joan Jett Blakk in San Francisco either in 1995 or 1996. My roommate at the time had agreed to be Joan's ride and escort for the evening at a political fundraiser in the Castro district, and asked if I would like to join. He told me we would go to this fancy fundraiser, grab some free food and drinks, then go out for the evening. The event was at a private residence, and I remember it being filled with wealthy looking LGBTQ+ folk, and even though I had attempted to look nice for the occasion, I felt severely underdressed. Joan was in some Jackie Kennedy inspired drag, and she worked the room skillfully. When her duties were done, Joan became Terence and we all went out for the night. I remember feeling inspired by Joan/Terence. He was an early example for me that you could be involved in nightlife and not cater to respectability politics, but still be actively political. Jett Blakk/Terence Smith sees drag politics as confrontational, and a way to confront limited conceptions of gender, sexuality and identity. Smith writes; "Drag as politics forces those not blessed with an understanding of gender-fuck to deal with the issues of sexual roles and roleplaying. We, the gender-free, are leading the way for millions of homo and a couple of hetero sapiens to wonder: What is a man? What makes a woman? Can a man be a woman and still be a man? Can a woman be more manly than the manliest man? I say yes, yes and yes! There are no lines anymore; we have stomped on them all." But Jett Blakk's politics always went beyond identity by advocating for drug policy reform, tax reform, police reform, nationalized healthcare, gender equity, and cancellation of student debt, just to name a few of her platform goals going all the way back to 1992. As Bogad claims, through "combining issues of class conflict with queer cultural/aesthetic politics and definitions of beauty and freedom [Jett Blakk] was building, speaking to, and helping to sustain a queer

counterpublic, and reaching beyond that counterpublic to the greater public with a broad social justice agenda” (153).

Joan uses queer as a collective term, referring to the LGBT+ community, but she also uses it to express an intersectional politics, calling for socialized healthcare, police reform, reform of illegal drug policies, equal protection under the law despite class-based privilege, women’s rights, immigrant and refugee rights, and the list goes on. And, despite the analytical tension between these two meanings of queer—much like De Lauretis’s *Queer Theory* distinguishing itself from the “Queer” of *Queer Nation*—Jett Blakk’s discourse does not get tripped up in the technicality of this contradiction. Rather, the ambiguity here is productive. Perhaps Terence Smith’s performance of Joan Jett Blakk is already a destabilized ground for the political platform Jett Blakk espouses, which allows for a productive fluctuation between the minoritizing and universalizing understanding of queer. Jett Blakk’s performance of identificatory deconstruction prohibits the collapsing effect of a minoritizing understanding of queer. Additionally, in her naming, Joan Jett Blakk is inherently a performance of the abject. Terence Smith, a Black gay man, identifying as Jett Blakk, while wearing a faux Chanel jacket, leather mini-skirt, and pronouncing that the United States electoral process is a joke, is an act of disidentification. Jett Blakk is reflecting her abject identity as a gay Black man, a drag queen, and a politically identified queer, back upon a majoritarian society as a mode of critique, visibility, and survival.

And here, as I close out this project, I have to admit, perhaps I am nostalgic for this era. As Lucas Hilderbrand has written; “To a certain extent AIDS blurred the boundaries of class, race, and gender between previously disparate gay communities that united through activism; some of these divisions have returned. At a moment when gay politics has prioritized a relatively

conservative marriage agenda, perhaps what I am nostalgic for is not ACT UP per se but for the way it mobilized a queer community” (313). I have a similar nostalgia to Hilderbrand, in that I long for a queer counterculture that blurs the boundaries of race, class, and gender. However, I have to admit, what my nostalgia unhealthily draws me towards is not the political mobilization of ACT UP, most characterized by ACT UP New York, but the hedonism of living as if there were no future; I long for the apocalyptic sublime, but also the inevitable *communitas* of an “us against them” mindset. Perhaps the ambiguity in my nostalgia comes from the political distinction between what people think of as ACT UP, and the reality of ACT UP San Francisco. Hilderbrand points out; “As the most famous—and perhaps most spectacular—AIDS activist organization, ACT UP’s history has at times eclipsed other efforts. Specifically, ACT UP/New York, the founding chapter, has commanded a disproportionate share of attention in the history of AIDS activism—perhaps because much of this history has been written or recorded by its own members” (304). My queer compass, as someone who grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area, points toward San Francisco. With that in mind, my idealism of ACT UP and the queer politics it represents is also informed by the history of ACT UP San Francisco, which split into two groups in 1990, ACT UP San Francisco and ACT UP Golden Gate (now known as Survive AIDS). This split occurred on ideological lines, with ACT UP San Francisco eventually taking the position that HIV does not cause AIDS. Additionally, ACT UP San Francisco members have been accused of harassing and violently attacking AIDS activists, researchers and organizers that do not ascribe to their view. My nostalgia for queer unity is more ambivalent than a nostalgia that focuses solely on the history of ACT UP New York. This ambivalence extends to Queer Theory and a Queer politics, despite the fact that I identify as Queer as much as I identify as a gay man. Kadji Amin poses that the “indefiniteness” and resultant “mobility” of queer as a term in queer



theory poses as both “a disciplinary norm and a front” in that “queer studies has become a field paradoxically defined by its lack of a defined object of study and by its quasi-infinite mobility of reference” and yet these “field statements affirming *queer*’s inexhaustible definitional mobility claim to open up queer theory as an antidisiplinary mode of inquiry that is open to radical transformation and becomings...actually work to secure it as a field that need not be accountable to its own history.” (179). Additionally, Amin points out, “little queer scholarship actually uses *queer* in an entirely dereferentialized manner” (179). I think my turn towards history and context here, not in place of theorization, but in conversation with theorization, comes from my history with Queer as both an ambivalent identity category and an ambivalent figure for politics and analysis. Ultimately, I am not advocating for abandoning the term Queer, but for a reinvigorated history of the term and its ambivalence and contradictions, particularly in conjunction with the deathworld of the early AIDS pandemic. Interestingly, when I think back on that first time meeting Joan Jett Blakk, I remember attending the political fundraiser in the Castro district, but I cannot remember where we went after, despite knowing that we went out for the evening and partied. However, at the time, I was not that interested in the political event (except for the free food and drinks), and much more interested in the partying. I think the contradiction between what I was interested in at the time and the way I mark the event in my personal history now is indicative of queer nostalgia for the 1990s. At the time I just wanted to have fun, at any cost, because I felt that I had no future. But, when I reflect back upon it, I remember the revelry, community, and collective action, rather than the feeling of being abject and exposed to death. Something I have been trying to communicate throughout this project, more implicitly than explicitly, is the productive ambivalence of cultural productions that sit astride a praxis of no future and the desire to survive.

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