QUEER LESSONS IN SUBJECT FORMATION: LEARNING FROM AIDS & SEX

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ABSTRACT

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My dissertation investigates the formation of the subject. The subject I refer to here is the person, the individual who is shaped by language and discourse, is hailed by interpellation, and is affected by ideological social, cultural, and political forces. I poke and prod at how and why the subject is constructed, and during my analysis of the subject and its formation, I use AIDS literature and art as a lens. While doing so, I discover there is a tight knot around how the subject can define and experience itself; thus, I work to loosen that knot, opening more space and air for novel ways the subject is formed—ways that do not encourage conformity, ways that give the subject more agency and creativity in how they become and who they are. Through my analyses and interpretations of works from the AIDS art archive, I uncover queer lessons that confuse, interrupt, and destabilize strict notions of what the subject is, how it is constructed, and how it can express and experience itself. Furthermore, I find that queer and perverted sexualities—erotically-driven desires that exist outside of dominant cultural norms—are an extremely powerful force that destabilizes normative ways that drive and determine how the subject is formed. Ultimately, I argue for a rescripting of how the subject is constructed and offer alternative approaches to subject formations—what I refer to as queer modes of self-authorship. Each of my four chapters narrows in on a queer mode of subject construction: queer interpellation, contact relationality, bearing witness, and desire and pleasure, respectively. These modes buttress my call for a proliferation of ways the subject can be authored and be read.

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NAVIGATING THE FORMATION OF THE SUBJECT: AIDS & SEXUALITY

"All the state apparatuses function both by repression and by ideology."
—Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*

Traversing Subject Formation

How does the formation of the subject work? This is the question that drives the core of my work here. I poke at, I prod at, and press at how and why the subject is constructed. I do so by looking to AIDS literature and art. The AIDS pandemic and the art that came out of it provides an especially telling prism from which to gaze through while analyzing the subject and the ways in which it is formed. During its height, the AIDS crisis was a kind of X-ray—it brought to light the meat and bones that make up our cultural, political, and social worlds, and gaining a better understanding of what comprises our worlds allows for a clearer grasp on how the formation of the subject works. And sex. Of course, sex. Though not all AIDS literature is about sex, I find that much of subject formation is about sex. Even when that means the lack thereof. Hence, sex, too, is at the heart of my dissertation: "Queer Lessons in Subject Formation: Learning from AIDS & Sex." In my work I show how AIDS and sex literature and art pulls back a curtain and behind it we find a kind of map that diagrams various features, structures, systems, and apparatuses that affect the formation of the subject. In the AIDS stories and art I analyze, examine, and interpret I discover queer lessons about subjectivity, community, human connection, and ideology.

Ultimately, by way of traveling through AIDS narratives, I argue that queer sexuality—erotically-driven desires that exist outside of dominant cultural norms—is an extremely powerful

force that has the ability to destabilize normative ways that drive and determine subjectivity. Through my claims, then, I render modern anglo-western identity less stable—identity constructs specifically built around hetero-supremacy, white-supremacy, and patriarchal systems of power. More so, I call for a kind of loosening of identity and with that loosening I see the emergence of other ways the subject can experience their worlds. I discover there are so many beautiful ways to define and experience self that deserve more attention. Subject formation is not a zero-sum game, and I add more pieces to the pie. Thus, I call for a revisioning, a rescripting of how the subject is constructed. I argue that there needs to be novel ways in which the subject can define themselves and experience who they, how they move about the world, and how position themselves in communities.

I travel through verbal and visual AIDS narratives from the height of the crisis during my dissertation journey. During this journey I carry with me in my conceptual backpack subject, queer, race, and feminist theories. Taking these theoretical tools with me during my critical and analytical travels serves me well by providing me the intellectual framework that allows me to join past on ongoing conversations. I put myself in conversation with theorists who investigate the subject and subjectivity; for instance, Louis Althusser's foundational work on interpellation grounds my revisioning of this force. Michel Foucault's writings also helps me consider how institutions of power effect the subject and how sexuality can be a tool to rethink how and why that happens. Judith Butler's works helps me parse out what it means that becoming a subject is on ongoing and continual process. My project both leans on and pushes against a variety of queer theorists, such as Leo Bersani, Chris Castiglia, Gayle Rubin, Jack Halberstam, and Lee Edelman. Theorists such José Esteban Muñoz, Vivian May, Darieck Scott, and Alexander Weheliye help me analyze intersectionality and the role race plays on the subject and on sexuality. Sara Ahmed,

Leigh Gilmore, and Adrienne Rich are among the feminist theorists with whom my project dialogues with as well. At times my work overlaps with these and other theorists' ideas and claims, and at times I diverge from them, but in either case, my understandings of, notions, and arguments about the subject, queerness, race, and feminism have been productively influenced by the conversations they inform.

One of my contributions to the fields of queer literature, queer theory, and subject theory relates to how I envision and revision fresh ways of thinking about who we are, how we become, and how we experience ourselves and our worlds. My intervention is an important one to add to conversations about the subject, about queerness, about queer literature because it opens up more space and air for different ways we can define and understand ourselves, ways that don't encourage conformity, and ways that give us more power and creativity in self-authorship. I find that there is this tight knot around how a person can define and experience themselves; I loosen that knot by providing alternative modes of self-authorship. In doing so, I confuse and destabilize strict notions of what the subject is, how it is formed, and how it experiences itself. Ultimately, I call for a proliferation of ways the subject can be authored and be read. Each of my four chapters explores a new way of self-authorship, each offers a specific example of a queer mode of subject formation: queer interpellation, contact relationality, bearing witness, and desire and pleasure, respectively. To set the stage, I next provide preliminary definitions and descriptions.

Interpellation is a central mechanism at work during the constitution of the subject. It acts to call or hail the subject, thus producing them as such. It works in the service of subjection, the making of the subject. For the most part, I source my definition of interpellation from French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, keeping in mind that as a Marxist interpellation has strong class and economic implications for Althusser, whereas much of my writing and analysis focuses

on how other cultural ideologies serve to hail the subject. Interpellation is a mechanism that works to hail or call the subject; once the subject turns toward the call of interpellation she is subjected, thus becoming a subject within systems and regimes of power. Queer interpellation complicates the Althusserian concept of interpellation. Queer interpellation, as I define it, is when the subject is hailed by queer sexual desire rather than by the authority of patriarchy. It divests from the cis-heteropatriarchal ideologies that classic interpellation relies on and invests in queer ones. A subject hailed by queer interpellation is one that is then tethered to queer desire.

Relationality is the process by which subjects relate to and connect to each other and their ideologies. This process produces social structure and organization of thought—a structure and thought that rely on one subject relating to another subject because they "see" themselves in the other. This is why relationality is a controversial mode of organization. Some activists and theorists, such as Alexander Weheliye, support relationality, as it can engender criticism of subject formation and create a sense of community and connectedness. However, other critiques—Leo Bersani, for instance—reject this interpretation of relationality because, as the argument goes, once everything and everybody can relate to everything and everybody then there is no difference and without difference there is no queerness. The implication here is that relationality is a way of organizing society that has the potential to evacuate difference. In my analyses I work through both sides and resolve that relationality does have the power to engender a sense of community and connectedness. Ultimately, I argue for what I term "contact relationality." Contact relationality is a queer mode of subject formation that relies on connection with others. This way of connecting to others does not rely on recognition; the subject does not need to recognize itself in or identify with others in order to have a meaningful connection with them. It is a way for people to relate and connect with each other based on differences not on

similarities. Contact relationality comes out of the mingling of people from divergent races, genders, classes, and sexual orientations. This form of connection invests in human connection founded on difference and divests from relationships sourced from sameness.

Witnessing—to bear witness to (a fact or statement); to testify to, attest; to furnish oral or written evidence of (OED)—is a necessary element in having a meaningful subjectivity. The act of witnessing or bearing witness allows the subject to be a more active participant in their self-creation and knowledge making. I explore bearing witness as a central element to beingness and knowing, and in doing so, set forth that it is an act that allows subjects to recognize themselves and their worldviews outside of culturally dominant, heteropatriarchal, white supremacist modes of understanding.

Desire and pleasure are another queer mode of self-authorship. Defining self via erotic desire and bodily pleasure is both viable and legitimate, making these sexually charged feelings a meaningful entryway into how subjects can experience and interpret themselves. I explore how embracing perverted desires and pleasures can be a personal act of resistance and activism. Through my explorations, I discover that a personal activism built from erotic gratification has a lot of powerful and seductive potential to reframe subject formation.

Sketching and Stitching Chapters

Each of my chapters, then, explores a factor that plays a role in the formation of the subject—in doing so, each chapter defines a queer mode of self-authorship. The purpose is to figure ways to rescript subject construction. There are so many beautifully personal and creative ways to define and experience selfhood—ways aside from identity, for instance, and the

multitude of possibilities deserves attention. I find that there is a very tight knot around the ways a person can define who they are; I loosen that knot by destabilizing strict notions of what a subject is and by providing examples of alternative modes of self-expression. My intervention is an important one to add to conversations about the subject, about queerness, and about queer literature because it opens up more space and air for fresh ways we can define and understand ourselves, ways that do not encourage dispassionate conformity, ways that do give us more power and creativity in self-authorship.

I look to AIDS literature to explore how the subject is constructed, how we are formed, and how we connect to and experience our worlds and communities. During my exploration, I discover various features, structures, systems, and apparatuses that affect the formation of the subject. In the AIDS stories and art I analyze and interpret, I bring to light queer lessons about subjectivity, community, human connection, and ideology. Ultimately, by way of traveling through AIDS narratives, I argue that queer and perverted sexualities—erotically-driven desires that exist outside of dominant cultural norms—are an extremely powerful force that has the ability to destabilize normative ways that drive and determine subjectivity.

My first chapter "Turning Toward David Wojnarowicz: Interpellating a Disinstitutionalized Subject" begins to do the work of analyzing subject formation—here I show how reading AIDS literature can be a fruitful way to consider alternative modes of subject construction. As I consider what a redoing of subject formation might look like, I turn to the art of David Wojnarowicz—queer artist, life writer, and AIDS activist. I explore Wojnarowicz's memoir and photographic work because in these parts of his archive I see three methods of creation—recording, bricolage, and memory—that illustrate a process of subject construction that is steeped in erotic imagination. Through a series of discovery-driven close readings, I

interpret Wojnarowicz's AIDS art as a representation of an alternative kind of interpellation—one that hails the subject by way of queer desire, rather than by way of heteropatriarchal institutions of white supremacy. The result of such an interpellation, I argue, is a radical subject: a disinstitutionalized one. I find that Wojnarowicz's art and methods of creation explore the possibility of this radical deinstitutionalized subject, a subject called by pleasure, and, perhaps most importantly, his methods show me that erotics can open new forms of interpellation. For Louis Althusser a "bad subject" is one who can, "on occasion provoke the intervention of one of the detachments of the (Repressive) State Apparatus" (269). In other words, the "bad subject" is one who does not turn toward the call of interpellation. Though I find this possibility extremely attractive, I do not, ultimately, believe it to be possible because, let's not forget, of course, that, "ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects," and so we are all, "*always-already subjects*" (265). Given the inescapable position of the subject as always-already, and considering the power of interpellation to keep the subject in that position, then, what I do believe possible are alternative forms of interpellation. Subjects can turn toward hailings other than those made by heteropatriarchal, sexist, straight state apparatuses. Wojnarowicz's AIDS art helps me understand that these alternative interpellations be necessarily charged by desire and queerness. Ultimately, I find that Wojnarowicz's work frustrates the classic Althusserian notion of interpellation. Queer interpellation, then, is when the subject is called by queer sexual desire.

In my second chapter, "Desiring Erotic Transgression: A Path Toward Contact Relationality and Beyond Identity in Samuel Delany's *The Mad Man,*" I look specifically to Samuel R. Delany's *The Mad Man*—an absolutely crucial part of the AIDS archive—in order to analyze what sex and race say about how and why subjects come into being. In thinking through these ideas, I am inspired by José Esteban Muñoz's insights on relationality (*Cruising Utopia*)

and Delany's theory on contact social practice (*Times Square Red Times Square Blue*). Blending together these Muñozian and Delanian concepts allows me to explore radical subjectivities—thus opening up new ways of connecting. These "new ways" are what I refer to as *contact relationality*. In my discovery-driven close readings of *The Mad Man*, I find that contact relationality can be grown by way of erotic transgressions—most especially racially charged ones. I also discover that contact relationality is consequential as a means to make purchase on a subjectivity that is not based on inclusion or exclusion but rather on connection—connection that does not rely on identification or recognition. I make a case that contact relationality is an especially valuable queer mode of subject formation because it makes way for people to relate and connect with each other founded on difference.

In my third chapter, "Muddying Genres of Being: The Power of Bearing Witness in Jan Zita Grover's *North Enough*," I bring together feminist, critical race, and decolonial theories as I interpret Jan Zita Grover's memoir *North Enough* as both a feminist epistemological and feminist ontological project, and in so doing I read it as an investment in modes of knowledge acquisition and ways of being that go outside the limitations of heteropatriarchal visions of what we know, how we know it, and who deserves to know. Within this context, the chapter close reads moments in Grover's book that shed light on the power of bearing witness. I discover in these close readings of witnessing that the distinction between what does and does not constitute existence becomes blurry, which, in the end, supports my call for the reevaluation and even restructuring of genres of being. In doing so, I lay stress on the collapse of the distinction between the subject and the object and critique the assumption that being an object is inherently negative, asking my readers to reassess the process of objectification and what it means to be a subject.

My last chapter, "A City of Archived Harbingers: BDSM & AIDS in Amsterdam," allows me to revisit time I spent researching in Amsterdam's International Gay/ Lesbian Information Center and Archive (IHLIA), which houses Europe's largest LGBT heritage collection. During my research I found visual and verbal art objects that delve into the city's BDSM and leather communities. Works being produced in the 1980's by visual artist Nigel Kent and writer Jacob Lowland are particularly striking, especially in the ways they dance around the AIDS crisis, which I read as being in the genre of escape fantasy. While glossing their work, I also find instances of the crisis haunting some of the pieces that were created before the first reported cases, generating a kind of slip in time. The objects and the way I read them as queering time opens a space for the processing of knowledge to be reorganized in such a way that does not align with conventional notions of chronology—this allows the reader/ viewer to connect to the objects and the narratives and histories they tell at a more intimate level. Together the fantasy and haunting elements serve today as a reminder of injurious queer histories. However, these aspects also illustrate how deviant sexualities can be a powerful act of activism and resistance.

Jointly these chapters thread together an exploration of the formation of the subject, the forces that are at play during that construction, and the ways such forces can be destabilized. During this exploration, each chapter investigates a different mode of how such a destabilization can occur and why it is necessary. Ultimately, I find that adding new pieces to the subject formation pie gives us more power and agency as we narrate and create ourselves.

The Queer Feminist Elephant in the Room

Queer feminism and its role in thinking about AIDS narratives and subject formation is a thread that runs throughout my project—at times it is a thick thread and at other times it is thin, but whether dense or fine, explicit or implicit, queer feminism helps sew together my readings, ideas, writings, and aims. When I began my dissertation research, *What does feminism present have to do with AIDS past?* was one of my central driving questions. Over time, I discovered that contemporary feminism can learn a lot from the AIDS crisis and the art that came out of it. AIDS narratives provide lessons about how to better imagine and interrogate what it means to be a subject—this is transferable when thinking about what it means to be a female subject, which I most certainly think should be a central consideration in feminist work.

Feminists need queer(er) narratives—narratives that rethink who we are and how we become. Feminists need scripts that differ from those that are readily available today, and we can turn to AIDS stories of the past for them, for stories that give identifications, lessons, knowledges, relations, methodologies, and ways of being that challenge how we have been hailed by today's hegemonic, hetero-centric, patriarchal mainstream society. To borrow from Muñoz, we need a "queer futurity that is attentive to the past for the purposes of critiquing the present" (18). Put simply, feminism today can become queer(er) with the help of AIDS stories and the knowledges they hold.

I see queer feminism—a feminism that destabilizes identity and opens more modes of self-expression—as a way to put pressure on the definition of woman. Allow me to reflect here on this term *queer feminism.* The queer feminism I refer to is grammatically ambidextrous and sometimes ambiguous; it can be used as a verb to express a state of being and it can be used as an adjective to modify a noun. It should be less so understood as a noun though, as in a thing like

a doctrine or a movement. Queer feminism, then, the one that I maintain still needs more engineering, is a way of living and being—one that does not reproduce the existing cultural parameters, thus aiming to mitigate the oppression of marginalized subjects. It is a feminism that always recognizes the imbricated nature of sex, sexualities, genders, races, abilities, and classes and how these aspects of personhood are connected to power and privilege. It is a feminism that is messy and complicated and refuses generalization. It is a feminism that is always unfinished, always becoming. It is a feminism that refuses labels, restrictive categories, and claustrophobic identifications. Queer feminism is a state that leans backward by being grounded in lesbian and Black and Black lesbian feminisms, and at the same time it leans forward by considering recent scholarship that questions "what it means to be human?"[1]. Queer feminism interrogates definitions of *woman* in venturesome, often uncomfortable ways. By wrestling with questions regarding the category of woman, queer feminism can better fray oppressive institutions—ideologies like marriage, monogamy, and motherhood — that have for too long and too strictly defined what it means to be a woman.

My dissertation raises the idea that subjects can fail successfully by being queer feminists. This idea is an ongoing and complicated one; it is not one that my findings nor my textual analyses completely resolve or solve. That is one limitation I am happy to own because for me feminist writing is an interactive, non-hierarchical, reflexive, social investigative approach to study, teaching, and research. Writing in a feminist mode, whether it be critical or creative writing, not only uses content to call into question patriarchy and related systems of power, it also uses structure and form to do such interrogative work. Thus, I use feminist modes

[1] For instance, we see this kind of work in Mel Chen's *Animacies*, as it queers what it means to be a subject and even to be human by exploring overlaps between animate and inanimate objects.

of writing to arrange and drive my dissertation. I do this by asking questions and not providing one-size-fits-all answers. Please read this move as an invitation to participate in the making of knowledges and understandings. I also include memoir like moments for context, for ethos, and because, simply put, lived experiences matter. My dissertation calls for us to continue on with the conversation about how feminisms today can do better work. Ideally, this manuscript is a hailing, one that calls on us to be and become something different, something less recognizable, something queer.

A Call for Rescripting

Fundamentally, this dissertation is a look into what drives people. It questions and investigates what makes subjects who they are and why. Studying literature is one way to answer these questions. While writing and researching the project, I have discovered that I am drawn to AIDS literature and art because these are spaces where how and who we are as subjects, as communities, as individuals can be productively analyzed. Furthermore, sex and desire are often central to the texts I gloss and in doing so I have found that sexuality and erotic desire are crucial ingredients that make up who we are, and thus sexuality is a necessary factor to consider while delving into what creates a person and the worlds in which they live.

My call is to reframe subject construction in order to escape ideological scripts that tell and reinforce repressive, intolerant, discriminatory, and prejudiced ways of being and becoming. My call is to revision the formation of the subject by investing in a process of becoming that is rooted in pleasure, desire, and connection. Erotics being transgressive is not a new idea (e.g., Tim Dean's "Erotics of Transgression"), but erotics as a mode of transgression as a means to

destabilize toxic attachments to the western investment in identity is what I am arguing for as a means to rethink how and what it means to become and be a subject. Through my analysis of textual and visual AIDS narratives, I discover that basing who we are on intimate connections, pleasure, and desire is a way for such a rescripting to occur and a way to innovate novel queer modes of constructing the subject. Thus, more emotional, intellectual, and personal capital must be put into desire and pleasure—not just into queer desire, but this is a queer lesson because queerness emphasizes the importance of the power of pleasure and intimate connections. This is an entryway into something that is long past due: rescripting how we become.

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CHAPTER 1:

TURNING TOWARD DAVID WOJNAROWICZ: INTERPELLATING A DISINSTITUTIONALIZED SUBJECT

"*How do we train ourselves to recognize where power may lie at any given moment?*"
-Audre Lorde, *The Edge of Each Other's Battles*

The Problem

As a general rule, I was a good kid. I did my homework on time. I offered my seat to my elders. I said please and thank you. I didn't run in the halls. I went to church on Christmas Eve and Easter. I followed the rules, and I did so because that's what parents, teachers, doctors, and other authority figures called me to do. My own desires were often divergent from what I was hailed to do and to be. But so it went. My white, middle-American, middle-class, heterosexist, upbringing interpellated me to be a quiet, respectful, straight, good girl.

My childhood memories align with these kinds of powerfully normative hailings. I remember my mother teaching me how to carefully scissor out pictures of pretty white girls and handsome white boys from a thick Sears catalogue. She showed me how to playhouse with the cut-outs. She called the girl cut-out "mommy" and the boy cut-out "daddy." I made the paper mommy and daddy dolls kiss. Real life mommy smiled and nodded at me. Lesson learned.

I remember playing in a tiny blue plastic pool on a friend's porch. A couple neighborhood kids and I used the green hose attached to the side of the brick red house to fill the pool. We sat in it, seeking a bit of relief from the heartland humidity. We got naked. We played with our genitals, checked out each other's, too. My friend's grandmother stepped out from the front door. She called out to us, rebuking us: we were bad kids, she scolded. She told us to

immediately get dressed, to never again touch ourselves or each other, and not to tell anyone about what happened. Lesson learned.

I also remember climbing onto the yellow bus for school one early morning. I was about seven or eight years old. Lacking any sense of urgency, like most kids that age, I leisurely looked for a seat. The bus driver called back, "C'mon, son. Get a move on. Sit your behind down." I turned around, toward the driver's voice. He was talking to me. He called *me* son. He thought *I* was a boy. I recall thinking excitedly: *does this mean I can be a boy? I don't have to be a girl?* What a possibility! This prospect was fleeting though. Just seconds after I turned toward the bus driver's call, he corrected himself, "Oops. Sorry, little miss. Sit down, please." Lesson learned.

I was regularly and continually interpellated—or called by and into ideologies via the mechanism of interpellation, which works in the service of subjection, or the making of the subject—by heteropatriarchal scripts like these, and so I learned to stifle my queerness: to hold at bay my incongruous sexuality and not-so-seamless gender. This stifling demonstrates the power of narrative[2]; narrative scripts—in my case culturally dominant and vanilla ones in particular—served as vehicles for interpellation, they carried and delivered the hailings that called me to repeatedly become the straight girl I did not quite desire to be. I became, then, over and over again, a "good subject" by way of narrative—I was a good subject because I turned and heeded to the call of normative and normalizing rhetorics of ideology.

[2] It's important to reference here Judith Roof's influential book *Come As Your Are: Sexuality and Narrative* because of the way her work made clear narrative's powerful influence: "Its omnipresence, ranging from the local and idiosyncratic to the cultural and philosophical, makes narrative seem both artifact and organizing principle, text and the embodiment of ideology itself. The sense of narrative ubiquity is further bolstered by the fact that narrative does not exist or operate separately form the other modes—identity, ideology, subjectivity, and sexuality—by which we organize existence and experience (xv-xvi).

Narrative, then, is required in order for an individual to be constituted a subject. The process of constitution requires story to hail the subject into being. The subject, accordingly, is that which is called by and into narratives. These narratives package and sell ideologies. For me, like many others, being successfully inscribed by hegemonic narratives translated to me being a good kid. A good straight girl. A good subject. That didn't feel right then, and it certainly doesn't feel right anymore. I wonder what being a bad subject might look like—a subject that does not answer the call of classic interpellation.

Though I'm still sketching out what a bad subject might look like, what I do know is that now as an adult queer feminist I don't want to be a good subject—I don't want to uncritically turn toward hailings made by heteropatriarchal, straight, sexist state apparatuses. These apparatuses were hard at work when I was a child and they still are—being dominant means they are more effective and readily available to hail me. Their authoritative status also means they nearly drown out callings from alternative interpellations. I want to figure out how and why subjects typically turn toward dominant callings, and how instead one might turn toward queer interpellations.

To that end, I want to render ways subjects can negotiate and experience gender and sexuality divergently—thinking about these identity markers beyond the patriarchal binaristic notions of those becomings is one way this might be done. This kind of reckoning is what I refer to as *divergent thinking*, which is more than simply thinking against the grain; this kind of radical thinking considers gender and sexuality in unexpected and under explored ways, ways that can inform a subjectivity less bound to institutional powers.

Ultimately, I want, then, to figure out how a disinstitutionalized subject—a subject that does not answer the call of hetero-, patriarchal-ideological formations of power—can be

constituted, because a subject bound to oppressive institutional powers cannot experience or know gender or sexuality in divergent ways. In order to do this figuring, I turn to the AIDS art archive. There is a great deal that remains to be learned from the AIDS epidemic and the art and literature that came out of it. I turn to the AIDS archive for lessons that inform feminist present and feminist future because it has helped teach me as a feminist how to think divergently, to think beyond gender and sexuality binaries. It also gives me the wherewithal to rethink questions of subjectivity, by way of interpellation.

David Wojnarowicz's work is an essential part of the AIDS archive. Originally, years ago, I turned to him because his artwork provided me alternative scripts from the heteropatriarchal narratives of my childhood. Themes of queerness and sexual desire written into his work called me, I turned, and I never looked back. Today I continue to turn to him because the methods he uses in his work—methods of queer-recording, bricolage, and creative memory—explore the radical possibility of a disinstitutionalized subject. I'm excited by this possibility. This subject turns away from the calls of heteropatriarchal institutions of white supremacy. And this subject is interpellated in novel ways—rather than be interpellated by the authoritative call of dominant state apparatuses, the disinstitutionalized subject is hailed by something else, something less established, something less state-sanctioned. Queer desire interpellates this subject. It is with these possibilities in mind that I analyze how Wojnarowicz's methods and art illuminate aspects of this kind of subject and its formation. In doing so, I also explore why the potentiality of a disinstitutionalized subject is important to feminist criticism today.

On Sourcing David Wojnarowicz for a Solution

But first, before going on, let me clear the air. David Wojnarowicz was a white man. As a feminist, addressing other feminists who predictably come from all sorts of backgrounds, turning to a white man's work for a model of redoing subject formation requires explanation, justification really. One of those justifications relates to how Wojnarowicz's artwork clarifies and complicates intersectionality—an approach to understanding identity, privilege, and oppression that many feminists, myself included, argue is central to feminist critique. The personal experiences Wojnarowicz accounts in his art illustrate the intricacies of intersectionality. The embedded privilege he had as a white man—a privilege his artwork often both explicitly and implicitly recognizes—is complicated by his queerness and his working-class status. Reading and viewing his work helps me, then, understand how lived experiences are always webbed with power and oppression. Wojnarowicz's work is certainly not the first to convey the complexity of intersectionality and there are many women authors who deserve attention and honor in this regard. My mind immediately goes to women like Audre Lorde and Cherríe Moraga and Gayle Rubin and to the ways in which their works highlight the importance of considering identity markers in concert with each other, in order to even begin to understand how oppression and privilege affects different people. It is most certainly not my intention to dismiss or discount the crucial and groundbreaking work made by radical lesbian feminists; in fact, they inform and inspire me to analyze how Wojnarowicz offers an important voice to the intersectional insights they started before him. He takes up conversations about intersectionality started by Black lesbian feminists like Lorde, but he does so in a unique context: the start of AIDS epidemic. Writing during and about the AIDS crisis, Wojnarowicz brings a hyperawareness to how quickly certain categories of people can be negatively affected by

intersectionality and how intensely the compounding effects of intersectionality can be when pairing together certain identifications. In the stories Wojnarowicz tells, this was a new category of people: those living with HIV or AIDS and the pernicious effect was state-sanctioned murder.

Busting hegemonic myths surrounding gender and sexuality and class and race and ability in raw, necessary, ways is another reason why I think his artwork offers something important to feminist critique. His art is not merely aesthetically complicated, it is politically and socially relevant today. In the United States during 1980's and early 1990's, Wojnarowicz was part of a radical activist movement that fought for the social, political, and medical rights of queers and people living with HIV or AIDS. Much of the activism taking place during the height of the crisis died with the activist leaders, like Wojnarowicz, and I think contemporary feminist critique needs that kind of rigorously progressive, anti-assimilative, activist sentiment. With the death of that brand of activism came an unsaid social agreement—sex perverts, queers, and radical feminists would stay silent so long as they received rights. Turning back toward the kinds of activisms, imaginings, and art from the AIDS crisis is a way to for queers and feminists and queer feminists today to pull out from the assimilative rut we've been drowning in. Breaking from assimilative habits is an essential part of rethinking the formation of the subject, and the formation of the subject needs to be centered in feminist scholarship, if that work is to be an impetus for social and political change. I turn to Wojnarowicz's artwork, then, because it provides a radical model of subject formation: an intersectional one, a divergently queer one, a politically anti-assimilative one—and, ultimately, a feminist one.

In order to understand how Wojnarowicz creates a fresh model of how the subject is constructed, it's important to analyze the specific methods he uses in putting together and illustrating that model. The kinds of methods he uses lay bare both queer and feminist struggles,

and in doing so he helps me understand why these are shared fights. One way he draws a parallel between the oppressions and experiences of queers and feminists and queer feminists is by making memoir so central in his writing and visual art. For many marginalized authors, memoir is a powerful truth-telling tool. Leigh Gilmore makes a strong case for the power of the autobiographical genre explaining that: "Our notion of the autobiographical is bound up in our notions of authenticity and the real, of confession and testimony, of the power and necessity to speak, and of the institutional bases of power which impose silence" (*Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* 80). Because autobiography trades in the economics of truth, it has the power to be used to denaturalize dominant narratives; as a consequence, memoir, an autobiographical form of literature, can be used as a device to author and imagine truths and subjectivities that run counter to white- hetero- cis- patria-ideological experiences—making the genre, maybe counterintuitively, quite feminist. Importantly, then, as a feminist genre, memoir simultaneously has a stake in truth while also putting pressure on truths authorized by institutional powers. In other words, memoir work, like Wojnarowicz's, forefronts marginalized voices and truths that often get omitted from hetero-dominant narratives.

That being so, violating traditional narrative forms is another power of memoir. It has been argued that narrative is traditionally bound in heterosexual systems and defined by patriarchy, and, thus, violating this form is inherently a queer move. Judith Roof makes the claim, for instance, that narrative and sexuality (especially heterosexuality, thus leading to her term "heteronarrative") are intensely intertwined and are the ways in which we understand the world we live in and relations we have; she claims that narrative and sexuality are, "organizing epistemes and as expressions of a figuratively heterosexual reproductive ideology in twentieth-century Western culture. Interwound with one another, narrative and sexuality operate within the

reproductive and/ or productive, metaphorically heterosexual ideology that also underwrites and naturalized understanding of the shape and meaning of life" (*Come As You Are* xxvii).

The narratives Wojnarowicz tell transgress traditional narratives by way of the themes he includes and the structure he employs; for instance, his narratives thematically put queer sex at their center and his books are often arranged by atypical parts—a reader can find statistical facts next to anecdotal expressions, for example. These examples give really only a glimpse into the insightfully transgressive work Wojnarowicz does. As this chapter unfolds, I dive deeper into how his art challenges normative narratives by way of his memoir work. I demonstrate that he does so through three specific methods of creation—methods that innovatively use recording, bricolage, and memory—that can help queer feminists revise, rethink, and redo the process of subject formation in the name of a disinstitutionalized subject.

These three methods of creation—recording, bricolage, and memory—guide this chapter, as it focuses on what I refer to as Wojnarowicz's *difference work*—work that models divergent thinking and ways to rethink the mechanisms at work during subject construction, most especially interpellation. Wojnarowicz's art is multifaceted, and it practices what it creates, insofar as it carries out queer methods while creating them as well. So, my overarching aim in this chapter is to travel through Wojnarowicz's creations in order to analyze and learn from the kinds of methods he employs. In doing so, I focus on three queer methods that are central to the ways he makes meaning and analyzes the world in which he moves. First, I look at how Wojnarowicz uses what I refer to as "queer record-making" as a means to document and write his self and queerness into history. He uses the queer record-making method to record a history that honors and produces difference rather than sameness. Next, I turn to how he uses bricolage. Wojnarowicz mixes and quilts together various kinds of mediums and narratives in ways that set

his work apart from other postmodern art that uses this style: his work makes sex and gender a necessary part of the bricolage technique. Memory is the last method I analyze while moving through Wojnarowicz's work. He uses memory as a creative method of queer resistance, a resistance that works against standardized ways of being and knowing.

A common thread runs throughout each of these three methods: difference. It is this thread that again makes his work feminist for me, in that it is invested in facilitating and fostering differences between people rather than in expunging distinctions. His work focuses on the lives and experiences of marginalized subjects—queers, sex workers, drug users, and destitute folks. Wojnarowicz puts a magnifying glass over subjects that are considered different and consequently deemed abject by mainstream culture, and in doing so he examines the systems of power that are at work in both constituting and othering them. The way he pays such close, careful attention to difference—the difference between queer narratives and normative scripts, between queer desires and straight yearnings, between queer subjectivity and straight experience—makes his work a valuable object to put under a feminist lens. Performing this kind of analysis, furthermore, affords feminist scholarship a unique perspective into subject formation.

The Conversation—Where It's Been, Where I'll Take It

Not long after its 1991 publication, Wojnarowicz's *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* received a swell of literary criticism. This memoir relays his experience as a queer New Yorker living with HIV and then AIDS during the crisis's height, and much of the early criticism on *Close to the Knives* relates to Wojnarowicz's recording as a person living with

the disease. For instance, Robert Burns Neveldine references *Close to the Knives* in his essay on the paradoxes culturally embodied by people living with HIV or AIDS. Jack Halberstam engages with the book more explicitly by using *Close to the Knives*—together with a variety of films and songs—to address the power of representation in terms of rage, the political, and the function of art. Other ways the book has proven to generate productive critical insights relate to liminal and binaried spaces by way of border theory, the homosexual body in sociomedical discourse, and the power of autobiography as a means to disrupt myth (Ramlow, Hane-Devore, Waggoner).

Recently a major show of Wojnarowicz's work was held at New York's Whitney Museum of America Art. The exhibition, "David Wojnarowicz: History Keeps Me Awake At Night," ran from July through September 2018, and since the show there has been a resurgence of critical and popular attention given to his work, especially his paintings and photography. To be frank, I am a bit ambivalent about the exhibition and the renewed attention. On the one hand, I'm glad his work is getting the consideration it has long deserved. I also appreciate that more folks get to experience his art that sheds light queer pasts—this is really important now when so many young queers need a history lesson on who and what came before them. On the other hand, the increased attention and popularity brings with it certain realities that Wojnarowicz himself was critical of—unbridled capitalism that serves to reward the wealthy and cripple everyone else is one reality. Getting to NYC or even the entry fee to the Whitney to see his work is not a cost most can afford, which de-democratizes his work rather than vice versa. Of course, this kind of gate-keeping is an unfortunate side effect when any underground art goes mainstream. So be it, I suppose.

But my ambivalence began to side with anger when I read on Twitter that cotton T-shirts toting Wojnarowicz images on the front were being sold for $135. I was angry because selling

these T-shirts at such exorbitant price tag just seemed to spit in the face of the very ideas his artwork represents—Wojnarowicz was a class struggle warrior, after all. That said, the Twittersphere also informed me that all proceeds from the T-shirts sales are donated to Visual AIDS—an organization that supports HIV-positive artists. Ugh, more equivocating. What I am not ambivalent about, however, is that even despite the more recent attention, Wojnarowicz's body of diverse multi-media work remains a largely untapped and vital interlocutor—one that conversing with can occasion greatly productive and relevant consequence to both queer theory and feminist critique.

With such a goal in mind, I examine a portfolio of Wojnarowicz's work that I've curated—during this examination, I move from his more major works to minor ones, from his more inscribed art to his less discussed, from the dominant to the marginal. My chapter moves in this way so as perform a decentering of the hegemonic. This directional strategy is inspired by both Wojnarowicz and feminist theory and the way they emphasis people who are pushed to the edges's of and persecuted by patriarchal society. In doing this paralleling, then, my chapter, focuses on a portfolio that includes the prose memoirs *In the Shadow of the American Dream* (1999)*, Close to the Knives* (1991)*, Memories That Smell Like Gasoline* (1992)*,* and a photo collection from his *Sex Series* (1988)*.* I see in each of these works mimetic models that examine subject formation—the process by which individuals become social beings by being hailed and authorized by the state and other ruling ideologies. I look to these models in order to consider how to reform and rethink how the subject is institutionalized; in doing so, I draw from and braid together Althusserian, Butlerian, and Foucauldian notions of the subject.

The rethinking I'm calling for needs to be done because common and conventional paths to the construction of the subject most typically produce subjects that tend toward assimilation

and sameness rather than nonconformity and difference. Let me be clear here about what I see as the connection between difference and subject formation: the more that is known about how the subject is constituted, the better understanding there will be regarding how one subject is formed differently from the other, and consequently the more likely the same tired processes of subject formation can be revised. In other words, knowledge about subject formation leads to power over how difference between people is made and sustained. As a result of such knowledges, assimilative tendencies can be mitigated and aberrational proclivities incited. The stakes: there is great value in not being absorbed by dominant ways of becoming. If every subject assimilated, then everyone could relate to everyone else. If everyone could relate to everyone else, then there are no differences and without differences there is no queerness. Frankly, a world without queerness is a boring, colorless, airless, stale, desireless, and oppressive one. It's institutional. That is not a world I want live in. These are my stakes. These are the reasons why I turn to the methods—recording, bricolage, and memory—at work in Wojnarowicz's stories, methods that model how a disinstitutionalized subject may be constituted.

Method #1—Recording

I begin my discussion on how Wojnarowicz's methods encourage divergent thinking and fashion a disinstitutionalized subject via queer record-making because this kind of recording is in the DNA of his work. Wojnarowicz's art begins to receive underground recognition in the late 1970's, and he continues to work creatively until his death of AIDS-related complications in 1992. A central tool for Wojnarowicz is documentation. His work documents his own experiences as a survivor of child abuse, as a sex worker, and as a queer man living in New York

City during the peak of the HIV/AIDS crisis. His creations are personal and intimate; they are public and exposed; they are carefully attentive to politics, government, and social activism.

He records the personal and the private through a wide variety of mixed media and multimodal art forms: literary memoir, street-art style painting, sculpture, super-8 film, graphic novel, and photography. No matter the media, recording what's happening to him and the cultural landscape around him is Wojnarowicz's primary creative tool; this recording a method of imaginative meaning-making through documentation that makes internal external and the political personal. It also allows him to show how public institutions affect the private lives of subjects. He tracks the lives, histories, experiences, and deaths of people in queer communities, and, in doing so, he both *produces* something queer and *does* something queer—consequently his both *makes* queer stories and histories and *executes* queer aesthetic and form. For me, then, his artistic records are valuable products and valuable models. In other words, they both tell and show.

Wojnarowicz's queer record-making method can be analyzed as a model for creating alternative narratives that challenge institutions of power which serve to reinforce the oppression of disenfranchised groups. His recording method also shows how to make histories queer. And in doing so his method demonstrates how to recover and preserve queer histories—non-homogenous, non-privileged pasts—that are too easily forgotten because, "History is created by and preserved for rich white straight people" (Wojnarowicz, *Aperture* 27). The records he makes center marginalized people and historicize the sexual body. Situating the sexual body in this way parallels calls made by David Halperin to, "[reconstitute] the body as a potential site of cultural activism and political resistance. If the sexual body is indeed historical—if there is, in short, no orgasm without ideology—perhaps ongoing inquiry into the politics of pleasure will serve to

deepen the pleasures, as well as to widen the possibilities, of politics" (103). By making records that are necessarily political and that bring into focus the queer sexual body, Wojnarowicz does the exact kind of work Halperin is referring to.

The queer histories Wojnarowicz documents, like those of NYC queer street kids who were tossed out by homophobic birth families and rejected by conservative social institutions like churches and schools, are ones that often do not get passed down from one generation to the next and in turn do not get remembered. Not only was he making divergent meanings about desire and producing knowledge about sex's power to disinstitutionalize the subject[3]—a power that allows the subject to disengage from classic interpellation and instead engage in an alternative hailing—his methods of recording preserve a history, a queer history, that too often goes unrecognized or is erased entirely.

Along with the labor of preserving and recovering queer narratives and histories, an even more pressing reason why I consider Wojnarowicz's record-making a specifically queer one—and one that is particularly valuable to feminist critique today—is because it is ardently political and aggressively non-assimilative. His progressive politics criticize a government influenced by religious rhetoric and steeped in conservative ideologies. Wojnarowicz champions radical politics by recording the lives of queers and junkies and sex workers in ways that critique and

[3] I am evoking Bersani's idea that sex can be the impetus for the subject to undergo a self-shattering, as outlined in his essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?". In this piece, he calls for a radical "reconstruction of subjectivity" (138), and my project here is totally on board with him in that respect. However, my concept that sex has power to disinstitutionalize the subject differs from Bersani's self-shattering—first, I do not draw from psychoanalysis, but rather my theorizing is ground more in continental philosophy, post-structuralism, and feminist theory. Second, Bersani's self-shattering as a mode of reconstructing the subject is sudden redesign (at the moment of jouissance) of the subject, whereas I am theorizing a kind of reconstruction of the subject that is slow and ongoing—it is a constant resistance that works by way of alternative modes of interpellation—queer ones, specifically.

analyze political and cultural institutions of power. His work criticizes mainstream media, for instance, for being a classist, hyper-biased, capitalistic institution with too much power over how HIV/ AIDS and the people it affected were portrayed. In a 1990 interview for *Aperture,* Wojnarowicz explains that his art gives, "A rich historical record of our bodies, our lives, and the environment our bodies move about in… [and] contests the historical record formed and implemented by rich white owners of mass media" (26). Mass media is not the only institution his queer records criticize, however. His art documents how religion demonized sex and people with HIV or AIDS, how the medical industrial complex gave the epidemic inadequate research attention, and how AIDS stories were homogenized and silenced by the government to murderous results. For Wojnarowicz, these kinds of institutions—organized religion, the medical industrial complex, and the state—served to interpellate the subject into becoming assimilated into mainstream culture, a culture he saw as pernicious to queers.

Wojnarowicz's memoir *In the Shadow of the American Dream: The Diaries of David Wojnarowicz* compellingly teases out the workings of interpellation. In this book, Wojnarowicz documents his life and the cultural and social institutions that impact him. Much of what Wojnarowicz records in *In the Shadow* are his sexual experiences, and he does so in the form of journal entries—included there are dates, sketches, and handwritings. However, *In the Shadow* is much more than simply Wojnarowicz's personal diary. It's a chronicle of how subjects are and are not hailed into personhood; it's a testimony of the time and place he witnessed; it's a documentation of modern urban experience before and during the deluge of the AIDS pandemic; it's an illustration of queer life at the end of the 20th-century in America; it's a record that has too often been buried. Wojnarowicz helps unbury it.

Public sex is a queer experience Wojnarowicz earnestly uncovers in *In the Shadow*. Appropriating abandoned public city spaces for sex as (predominately white[4]) queer geographies in New York City was a literal (though not legal) acquisition of land and a representational acquisition of power from the city and state—institutions bound to cis-heteropatriarchy and neoliberal policies. Wojnarowicz describes how queer folks found ways to slip into these public spaces for sex with both ease and consideration:

> we watched on the bankstreet pier the fucking until the guys separated and went their various ways, we sat on the far edge next to lapping water and posts and talked about the sense ya get in these scenes that although it's public sex ya still have the sense that ya should respect their privacy and not go over and watch, though watching from a discreet distance can only be expected as it is an intense visual to be confronted with. (*In the Shadow* 119)

The passage's tone here is very self-aware. David[5] is honest about being a voyeur at this moment; he notes, "watching from a discreet distance can only be expected," as if he is being called by the "intense visual." This set up of watching and being called, combined with the diction—especially the word choices "scenes" and "confronted"—brings to mind the Althusserian moment of interpellation.

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[4] The question of race is not missing from Wojnarowicz's work. He, for instance, marks the control of media as a white privilege. However, regular, explicit engagement with the experiences of people of color is one of the limitations of his oeuvre. For example, the large emphasis his work puts on queer landscapes, while simultaneously not emphasizing how such spaces were raced (not just queered) is a missed opportunity. An example of when this opportunity is most certainly not missed is in Samuel Delany's *Times Square Red Times Square Blue*, where Delany successfully considers the intersections of queerness, race, and class in public, urban spaces.

[5] I will use "David" when referring to David Wojnarowicz's actions and experiences within his memoirs; in other words, "David" refers to him as his own character, whereas "Wojnarowicz" refers to David Wojnarowicz as author.

Louis Althusser describes this moment to explain how an individual is hailed or interpellated by the state and, in turn, becomes a subject. It is the state, then, for Althusser that authorizes subjectivity. The scene on the pier that Wojnarowicz describes parallels Althusser's, insofar as it illustrates an individual turning toward the call of authority. However, Wojnarowicz's scene diverges from Althusser's, in that the authority in the pier scene is not the state. Sex is the authority for David. The "intense visual" of sex is what he turns toward. David sits on the pier, turns toward the call of queer sex, and so becomes a subject tethered to desire, rather than one connected to an institutional power like the state. Wojnarowicz illustrates in this scene that queer subjectivity is authorized by erotics. David becomes, at least for this moment, sitting there on the pier, a disinstitutionalized subject—one hailed by and bound to queer desire.

I want to spend more time on this connection between Wojnarowicz's scene and Althusser's, because moments of interpellation are ones that house great potential for creating divergent narratives. Interpellation—and the way it conscripts the subject via ideology—is a crucial mechanism in the formation of the subject, and for this reason it can be a productive mechanism for subverting oppressive narratives—patriarchal, classist, heterosexist, and racist ones.

Because interpellation is so intimately wrapped up with identification and authority, it's also a mechanism that can affect the relationship subjects have with how we identify and how we relate to institutionalized, authoritarian powers like biomedical science, mainstream media, the church, the traditional family unit, the educational system, and capitalism. Producing and preserving alternative narratives and records—ones outside dominant patriarchal scripts that support oppressive systems of powers—for subjects is also an important aim of feminist critique. For these reasons, it's productive to consider records, like the ones Wojnarowicz creates, that

queer the scene of interpellation. His records of queer interpellation serve as a model illustrating how subjects can identify with and be hailed by desire, for instance, rather than by patriarchal authority. His records of being hailed help me, and I think can help other feminists, see how subjects can be interpellated in new and creative ways—ways that trouble hegemonic institutions of power. This is an exciting possibility for both queer theory and feminist criticism.

As noted, Althusser describes how interpellation works via a scene, a public scene. A person is confronted or recruited by a representation of patriarchal authority and power, a police officer:

> For the convenience and clarity of exposition of our little theoretical theatre, we have had to present things in the form of a sequence with a before and an after, that is, in the form of a temporal succession. There are individuals walking along. Somewhere (usually behind them) the hail rings out, 'Hey, you there!' And individual (nine times out of ten, it is the one who is meant) turns around, believing-suspecting-knowing that he's the one – recognizing, in other words, that he 'really is the person' the interpellation is aimed at. (Althusser 191)

Althusser's scene of interpellation described here is relatively straight forward. The scene takes place in a public space, and in this space the person transforms from being an individual to being a subject. The scene Wojnarowicz gives us in the passage from *In the Shadow* about sitting on the pier and being called by the scene of gay sex is one of interpellation too, but this one is not so straight. While illustrating this moment of queer experience, he records a specifically queer version of an interpellative episode. Wojnarowicz documents an alternative moment of hailing. A queer calling. David is called by the "intense visual" of queer sex and desire, and thus he's hailed as a voyeur, and more importantly as a queer subject. In contrast to Althusser's scene,

voyeurism, desire, and sexual attraction are central in Wojnarowicz's, making it a queer moment of interpellation. The lack of patriarchal authority in this recorded moment also speaks to how it transgresses more conventional, institutional callings. This is one reason why it important to carefully consider queer record-making methods: to record, preserve, and produce moments that move beyond and offer divergent ways of becoming.

Before I look at another example of Wojnarowicz's queer version of interpellation, let's spend a bit more time with not so queer versions. In the archetypal Althusserian scene of interpellation, a person turns towards the call of institutional authority, a police officer specifically. This moment of hailing or interpellation is when an individual becomes a subject. Of course, this moment is not confined into one instant; it is, rather, ongoing, ubiquitous, and repetitive[6]. Michel Foucault explains that the call of authority occurs constantly and from all directions; the powers that do the calling are, "endlessly reproduced mechanisms of law, taboo, and censorship: from state to family, from prince to father, from tribunal to the small change of everyday punishments" (84-85). For both Althusser and Foucault, then, the hailings from institutions of power are inescapable.

Wojnarowicz, however, illustrates moments of interpellation that complicate this notion of inescapability. He reconfigures the classic interpellative scene by exposing and disrupting social and cultural power dynamics. The result is that Wojnarowicz demonstrates that it is possible to turn toward the call of a different, "economy of bodies and pleasures" (Foucault 159). Wojnarowicz's queer narratives disrupt homogenous, heteronormative discourses, and, as a result, interpellation is revisioned.

[6] The idea that becoming a subject is occurring and reoccurring at all times is a great value of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble.*

In the Shadow successfully illustrates a revised, queer version of interpellation that is animated by sexual desire. In *Close to the Knives*, Wojnarowicz takes this revision even further by modeling how queer interpellation can constitute a disinstitutionalized subject. There is a particular anecdote in *Close to the Knives* that is especially illustrative of Wojnarowicz's brand of Althusser's interpellative scene. The episode describes an experience traveling in the Southwest region of the U.S. David meets a stranger by way of a glory hole in a bathroom of a random tourist-trap. The two of them attempt to find, "a place away from the trooper patrol cars," a place where they could "get to know each other;" however, "there was no such place" (*Close to the Knives* 50). Despite the seeming inescapability of police authority, the two men find a location to hook up.

They come to a relatively quiet service road and David joins the stranger in his car. While fooling around, the two men continually glance toward the rearview window, in anticipation of the call of authority: "in the moment of their [cars] approach, we would stop, rearrange our anatomies, zip up our pants and assume the body language" (55). Here, in a moment of being hailed by dominant apparatuses and oppressive systems of power via the threat of an encounter with the police, David is impelled to replace his sex and re-closet himself. Notably, however, apprehension of the hail of authority and the resulting closeting of desire disintegrates upon the moment of jouissance:

> in the fracture of orgasm: the sensation of the soul as a stone skipping across the surface of an abandoned lake, hitting the blank spots of consciousness, all the whirl of daily life and civilization spiraling like a noisy funnel into my left ear, everything disintegrating, a hyper-ventilating break through the barriers of time

> and space and identity... had a cop pulled up in that moment and had I possession of a gun, I'd have not thought twice about opening fire. (57)

Though furtive here is a glimpse of a new kind of subject. This scene sets up an alternative re-telling of the standard Althusserian one. Though the before and during coital moments do not run counter to Althusser's scene of interpellation, the moment of climax gives a transgressive script. In this moment of "sex without law" (Foucault 91), David will not rearrange his sex; he will not re-closet himself; he will not heed to the hailing of state authority. For at least a brief moment, he is not a subject bound by heterosexist patriarchal institutions—institutions that are figuratively bound up in the prospect of a cop arriving and the resulting fear. David metaphorically opens fire on what typically hails the subject—ideological institutional apparatuses, a la the police—and as a result he revises the calling he turns toward. At least for a moment, a moment of great potential, it is sexual pleasure and desire that interpellate him. David's experience describes his partaking in the pleasure of analysis—he finds pleasure in experience and in the will to knowledge. What's further notable is that this experience centers orgasm; the result: an emphasis is put on both the importance of pleasure in the analytics of power and the potential re-articulation of power in pleasure. Moreover, this alternative scene of queer interpellation offers not only a different economy of bodies and pleasures, but also a different landscape of bodies and pleasures. This move from economy to landscape is a salient one, as it marks a shift of authority from managed resources (economy) to a vista of new authoritative prospects (landscape)—in doing so this move also marks that different, prospective, landscape as one illustrated by queerness, consequently aligning unorthodox sexuality with new authority, a mandate not soaked in institutional powers.

In both of the moments of divergence recorded by Wojnarowicz—the one on the pier and the one on the service road—David escapes from institutional powers by turning toward the call of an alternative authority, toward an eroticized queer landscape where consciousness and personhood are fractured, as is the uniformity of the institutionalized mechanisms of power. Wojnarowicz's scene records an unconventional interpellation. A queer one. The queer interpellation allows David to divest from classic interpellation, and as a consequence he also disposes from the cis-heteropatriarchal ideologies that classic interpellation relies on, invests in, and produces. The result is a disinstitutionalized subject—one hailed by queer sex, erotic imagination, and desire, and not by (patri) ideological state apparatuses. The takeaway: the disinstitutionalized subject is constituted by modes of interpellation that hail the subject via dissenting sexual desire.

Method #2—Bricolage

English has borrowed the term bricolage from French: "[The] construction or (esp. literary or artistic) creation from a diverse range of materials or sources. Hence: an object or concept so created; a miscellaneous collection, often (in *Art*) of found objects" (OED). This is a relatively contemporary understanding of bricolage, but the *collection of things* understanding can be traced back to Claude Lévi-Strauss, French anthropologist and early structuralist. In *The Savage Mind* (1962), he describes mythical thought as a kind of bricolage: "[creations of bricolage] always really consist of a new arrangement of elements, the nature of which is unaffected by whether they figure in the in-strumental set or in the final arrangement (these being the same, apart from the internal disposition of their parts" (13). Later, in his reading of

Lévi-Strauss's work, Jacques Derrida, in "Structure, Sign, and Play," takes up bricolage to argue that: "As soon as we admit that every finite discourse is bound by a certain *bricolage* and that the engineer and the scientist are also species of *bricoleurs*, then the very idea of *bricolage* is menaced and the difference in which it took on it meaning breaks down" (285). So, with Derrida bricolage's meaning moves into the realm of language and its limitations. Today bricolage is often associated with the way appropriation is used in postmodern literature and art—in this context, bricolage is: "The practice of working with whatever materials are at hand, 'making do' with what one has... [which] has the potential to create resistant meanings" (Sturken and Cartwright 378). When applied in visual art and literature, bricolage, then, is a tool used to piece together unlike things in order to create a unique, and often a subversive, narrative. What's important to note about bricolage for my purposes here is that, yes, it is a kind of quilting or collaging method of creation, but what makes it distinct from other kinds of collaging is that bricolaging borrows as a means to criticize and delegitimize the very thing it appropriates—the implication here is that bricolaging is a commandeering move; it's a mode of creation that takes authority from one object and the ideology it stands to signify and moves that authority to a different object and the ideology it signals to.

Wojnarowicz, for instance, uses bricolage as a tool to create narratives that decenter normative scripts and center queer ones, thus shifting authority from the former to the latter. His bricolage artwork rearranges dominant cultural images and narratives as a means to first underscore the power they hold, then to rupture that power, and finally to seize it. Like with record-making, his bricolaging models divergent thinking, and this model helps me better understand subject formation and the radical potential of a disinstitutionalized subject. Wojnarowicz employs bricolage by drawing from and quilting together a variety of media:

diaries, journals, memories, dreams, medical articles, government statistics, film, pornography, and photography. As I will demonstrate in this section, by pulling from these disparate sources, he pieces together art that disrupts hegemonic, heteronormative, narratives.

There are, admittedly, limits to his bricolage method. His bricolaging does not outright destroy hegemonic straight scripts; these narratives are too ubiquitous and too powerful to be completely erased. That said, Wojnarowicz does importantly and successfully interrupt the continuity and unity of mainstream histories and narratives. In his photography, for instance, the kind of interruptions he makes put pressure on common pedestrian notions that assume straight, vanilla narratives are universal or compulsory[7]. Photography and the narrative pictures create are a very powerful tool for Wojnarowicz because for him, "A camera in some hands can preserve an alternative history" (*Close to the Knives* 144). As a photographer, as a writer, as a bricoleur, then, Wojnarowicz promises non-state-supported histories, queer narratives, and radical ways of becoming that disturb deeply embedded institutions of power that regulate subject formation by governing interpellation.

And so Wojnarowicz's queer bricolaging produces queer stories, while at the same time decentering straightness, gender norms, and institutional powers. In doing so, his art rejects what he refers to as the "illusion of a One Tribe Nation"—the belief that late 20th-century America is a time and space where people are free to melt together, thus making citizen-subjects all equal

[7] I evoke and pay tribute here to Adrienne Rich and her revolutionary essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in which she explains that, "heterosexuality may not be a 'preference' at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force... the failure to examine heterosexuality as an institution is like failing to admit that the economic system called capitalism of the caste system of racism is maintained by a variety of forces, including both physical violence and false consciousness. To take the step of questioning heterosexuality as a 'preference' or 'choice' for women... will call for a special quality of courage in heterosexually identified feminists, but I think the rewards will be great: a freeing-up of thinking, the exploring of new path, the shattering of another great silence, new clarity in personal relationships" (216).

and the same. One effect of the counterfeit facade that reflects a nation made up of one big equal community is that subjects that do not fit the neoliberal mold get further marginalized; in other words, the myth of a One Tribe Nation omits from the American picture anyone who is not a good liberal subject able to pull themselves up by the bootstraps. The illusion erases those requiring welfare, for instance.

This myth that uses the notion of equality as an ideological tool to pedal a neoliberal agenda is being narrated at the end of the 20th-century through conservative rhetoric, which was being espoused by politicians like Jesse Helms and right-wing religious leaders like Jerry Falwell. These kinds of voices are selling fantasies couched in equal opportunity though they practically advocated homophobia, sexism, racism, and classism. Wojnarowicz counters these voices by using his art to mobilize progressive politics; his artwork rejects the illusion of a One Tribe Nation by quilting together queer sex narratives with ones that seem explicitly straight and non-sexual, thus flipping the typical mode of representation, furnishing queerness a haunting presence. This subversive move is especially effective in his photography. His photos weave queer sex scenes into images depicting hegemonic institutions of power that typically serve to interpellate subjects. As I've already discussed, his diverse work simultaneously produces and complicates how subjects are interpellated, and his photography and the bricolage used there also do this kind of important queer work.

Wojnarowicz is taking photos in New York City during some of the epidemic's worst years. This was a time when people living with HIV or AIDS were ignored by the state and the media, lacking any sort of intersectional lens, portrayed the disease as the gay white male cancer. Wojnarowicz's photography works to interrupt these kinds of pernicious misrepresentations—for this reason his images hold a vital spot in queer history. His photos tell too often untold truths

about people living with HIV/ AIDS: they were not second-class citizens, and they were dying at an alarming rate because the government refused to acknowledge the severity of the crisis.

His visual art importantly gives voice to queer desire as well. In one such image, *Untitled (One Day This Kid…)*, 1990, Wojnarowicz pairs a childhood photo of himself with text outlining the photo. The words confess: "This kid will be faced with electro-shock, drugs, and conditioning therapies in laboratories tended by psychologists and research scientists. He will be subject to loss of home, civil rights, jobs, and all conceivable freedoms. All this will begin to happen in one or two years when he discovers he desires to place his naked body on the naked body of another boy" (*Brush Fires* 95). The photo inset by these words shows Wojnarowicz as a suspender-wearing, doe-faced, buck-toothed, adolescent. It looks like it could be on the front of cereal box, reading as classic, wholesome, Americana. The juxtaposition Wojnarowicz creates by placing the written text around the visual text foregrounds queer desire, while simultaneously illustrating how this desire gets pathologized, silenced, and erased by medical science, the church, the media, and the state.

Brush Fires in the Social Landscape (1994) brings together a wide breadth of Wojnarowicz's photographic images, and, as Elizabeth Hess notes in and about the collection, "Until this book, no one has really considered how consequential photography was to David Wojnarowicz's overall body of work" (97). It's true, in order to understand Wojnarowicz's impact then and today, it's necessary to turn to his photographic oeuvre—his images make way for his personal experiences to be taken in, while, at the same time, critiquing a system that failed him and so many other folks with HIV/ AIDS. In *Brush Fires*, Wojnarowicz explains that for him photographs are:

> just tiny windows looking into the world, frozen moments of it that lie flat and quiet without sound and smell or movement… photographs are like words and I generally will place many photographs together or print them one inside the other in order to construct a free-floating sentence that speaks about the world I witness. History is made by and for particular classes of people. A camera in some hands can preserve an alternative history. (*Brush Fires* 1)

His tiny windows look into the world and reflect back at it something very different from the illusion of a One Tribe Nation. They reflect diverse stories of queer sex and of subjects that do not exactly fit inside pictures of institutional practices.

I examine next the collection *Sex Series (for Marion Scemama)*[8]. *S*hot around 1988, the series contains eight untitled montaged photos that combine backdrop images with small inset photos which Wojnarowicz drew from the photographic work of Peter Hujar, his close friend and mentor. This inset design makes the queer bricolage method notably prevalent in the *Sex Series (for Marion Scemama)*. Each of the photographs included in the series (see Figures 1-8) shows an image that covers most of the space in the piece. Imbedded in or overlaid on top of the larger image are Hujar's smaller photo negatives, circular in shape. This quilting together of photos is bricolage in action. Each individual image on its own tells one story, but by quilting and contextualizing them together Wojnarowicz tells a more complicated narrative—one about how same-sex desire can productively disrupt and resist institutions of power and the ways in which they interpellate the subject. His images, then, serve for me as examples of the different kind of interpellation that Wojnarowicz unfolds.

[8] All images: Courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P.P.O.W, New York © David Wojnarowicz

For Wojnarowicz it was important to disrupt the continuity of and resist dominant institutions because they tyrannize the subject, and so this series is: "about oppression and suppression. It's about sexuality in the age of AIDS and the attempted suppression of sexuality" (*Brush Fires* 162). The way Wojnarowicz interrupts oppressive institutions of power in this series of photographs is by pairing an image that signifies a dominant ideology with an image of gay sex; the sex act is nearly drowned out by the larger image, but at the same time it intersects that straight image. The result: the hegemonic narrative signified by the larger image becomes decentered by the smaller one.

To demonstrate this displacement, I begin with the first photograph (Figure 1) of the series because it articulates the culminated power of the *Sex Series (for Marion Scemama)* collection as a whole. The most visually dominant part of this photo illustrates paratroopers jumping from a plane—this portion of the image connotes war, hyper-masculinity, the western nation state, and the military industrial complex. Collectively these connotations represent patriarchal institutions, systems of power that work and instill fear of the state, as well as patriotism—in other words, these are the institutions that hail an institutionalized citizen-subject. However, the photograph includes an alternative hailing as well; in the lower left corner is an image of male-with-male anal sex. By quitting together these images, Wojnarowicz has given the viewer "a new arrangement of elements" (Lévi-Strauss 13).

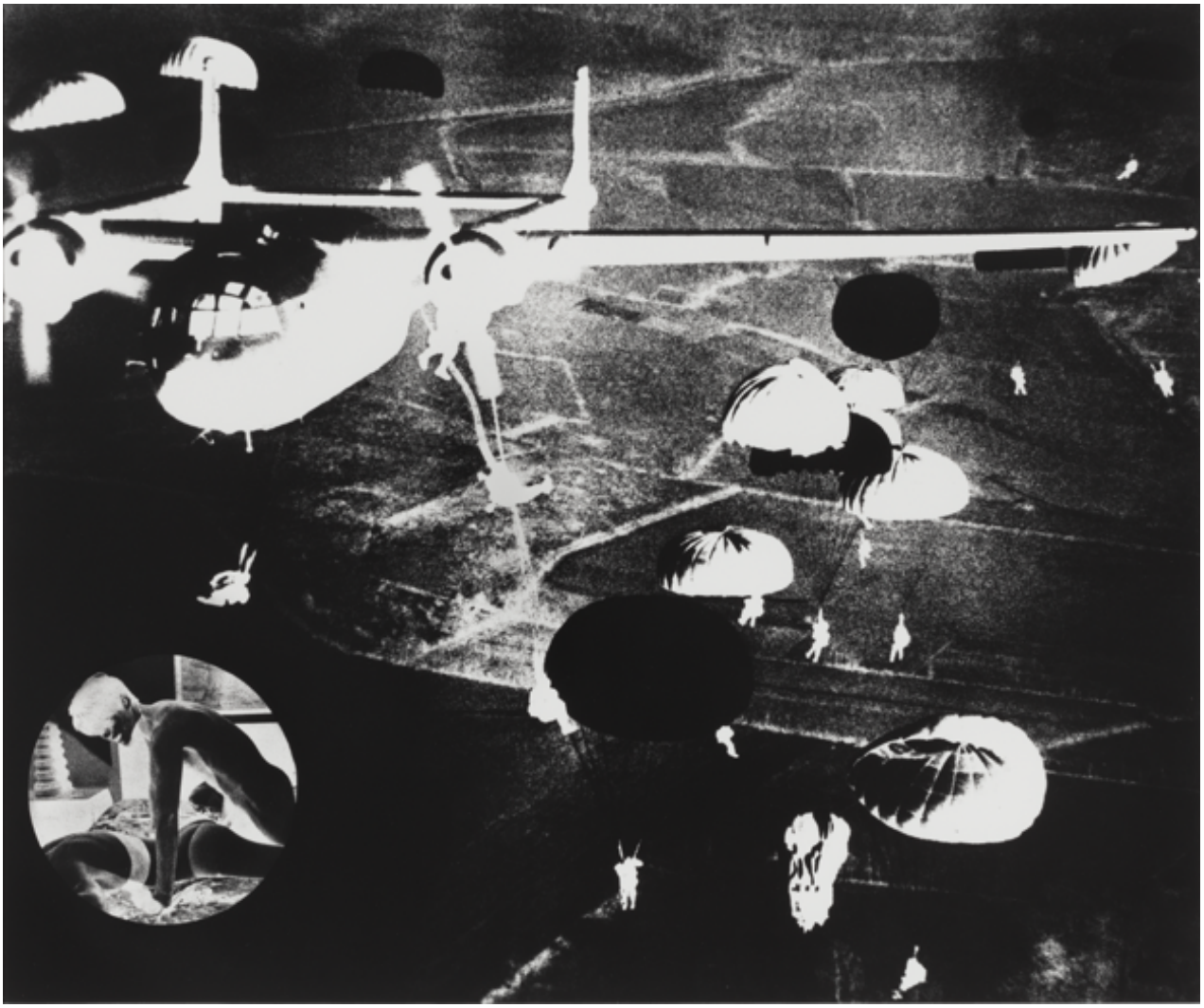

Figure 1:
***Untitled,* from the *Sex Series (for Marion Scemama) (plane)*, 1989**
Gelatin silver print, 16 x 19 13/16 inches

The bricolaged photo opens itself up to several understandings. For example, one interpretation reads the gay sex as hyperbole of hyper-masculinity; another glosses that the photo affirms the marginality of desire, especially gay desire, to state-sanctioned masculinity; a third reading sees how the image of men fucking interrupts the non-sexual image, causing a disunity that decenters the dominant image and its connotations.

Each of these readings of this wonderfully complex bricolaged photograph can certainly coexist; that said, my understanding of it most aligns with the third interpretation. A collection of formal elements helps me gloss the circular image as an interruption. It visually breaks up the unity of the larger one. It's arranged in the lower left corner, rather than the center, for instance, connoting a cutting-in rather than a balancing purpose. Furthermore, the military image takes up most of the space—it's bigger, visually louder. It literally takes up the most physical space on the page and it figuratively takes up the most interpellative space in mainstream society—so not only do the images' formal elements but also their content serves to decenter cis-patriarchal powers.

The ubiquitous ideologies wrapped up in the military image—the state, hyper-masculinity, war—are powerful interpellaters in day-to-day experiences. This larger image nearly swallows the smaller, circular one. But the circular one resists by interrupting the continuity of this larger, dominant image. The effect is that I read the relationship between the two images as one of resistance—the smaller image resists the engulfment of the larger one. It's as if the circular image depicting gay desire resists state-sanctioned masculinity, an institutionalized interpellative force. I read the interruption of and resistance against institutionalized interpellaters as another move toward new potentialities in subject formation. In this photo, Wojnarowicz has used eroticized transgressions to point to the possibility of a disinstitutionalized subject.

The other seven photographs in *Sex Series (for Marion Scemama)* also employ queer bricolage, and in doing so make similar interruptive moves. Like with the first photograph, the others include an image that takes up most of the page's space and this larger image is broken up by one or more smaller, circular images.

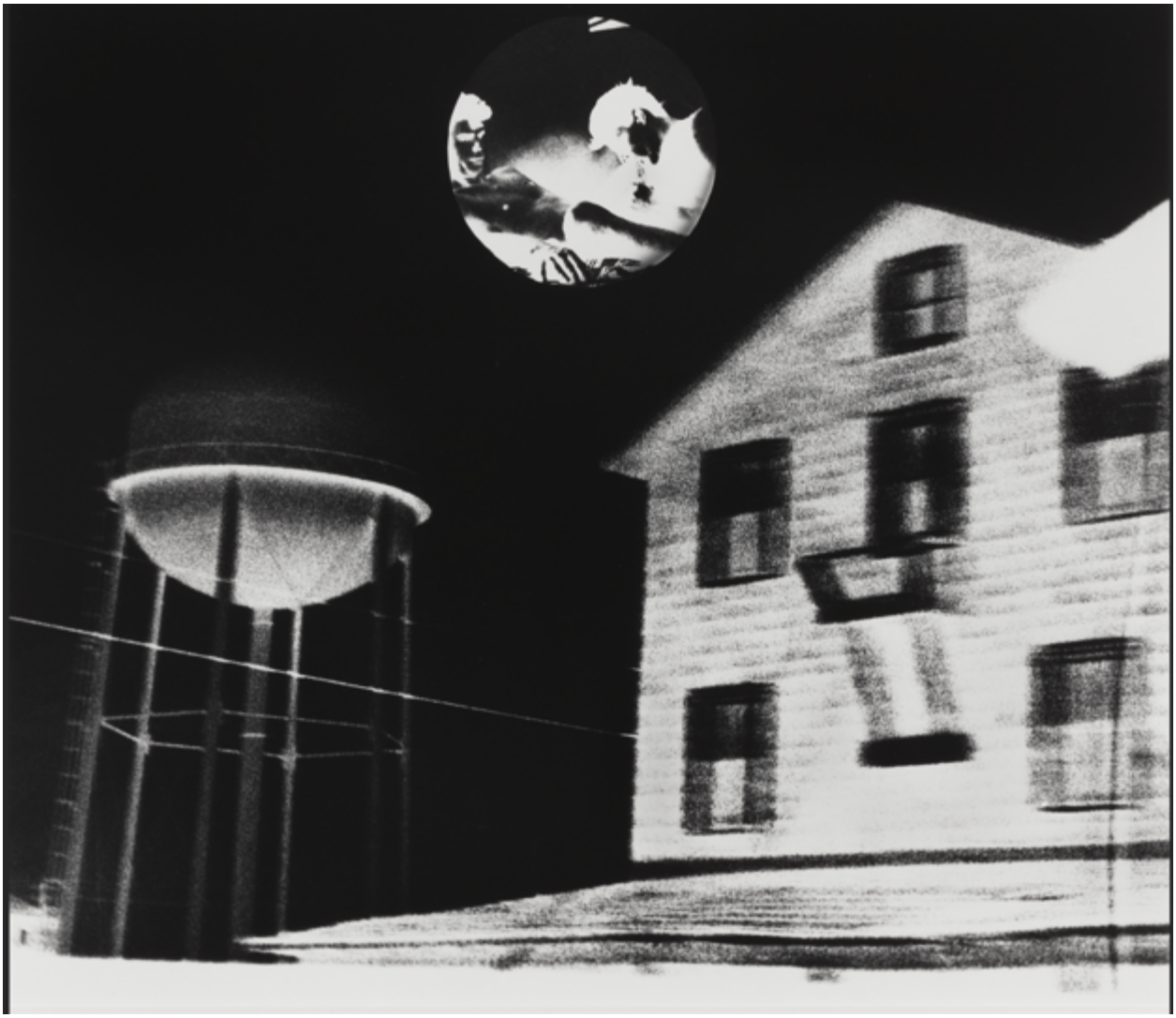

Figure 2:
***Untitled,* from the *Sex Series (for Marion Scemama) (house)*, 1989**
Gelatin silver print, 16 x 19 13/16 inches

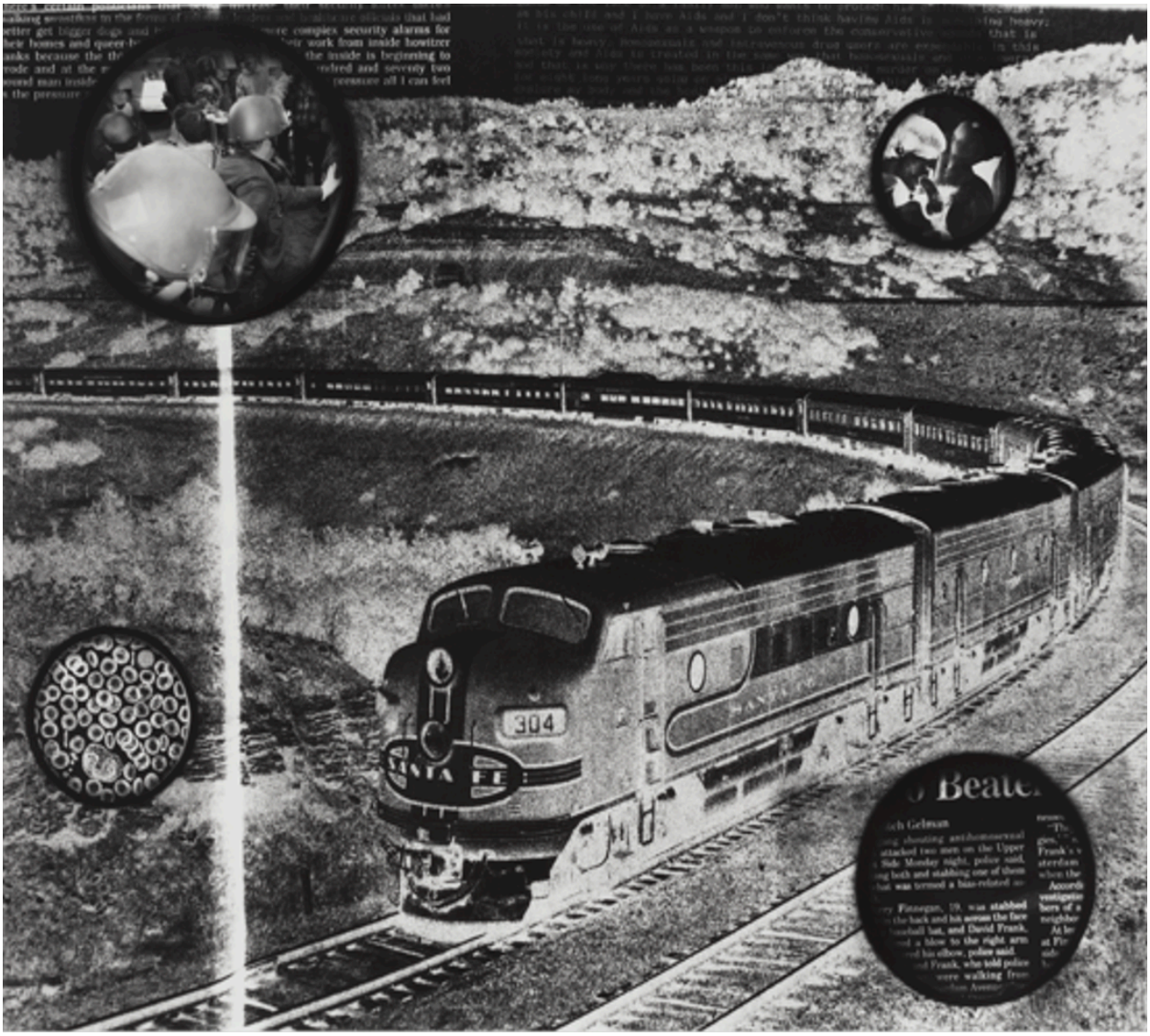

Figure 3:
***Untitled,* from the *Sex Series (for Marion Scemama) (train)*, 1989**
Gelatin silver print, 16 x 19 13/16 inches

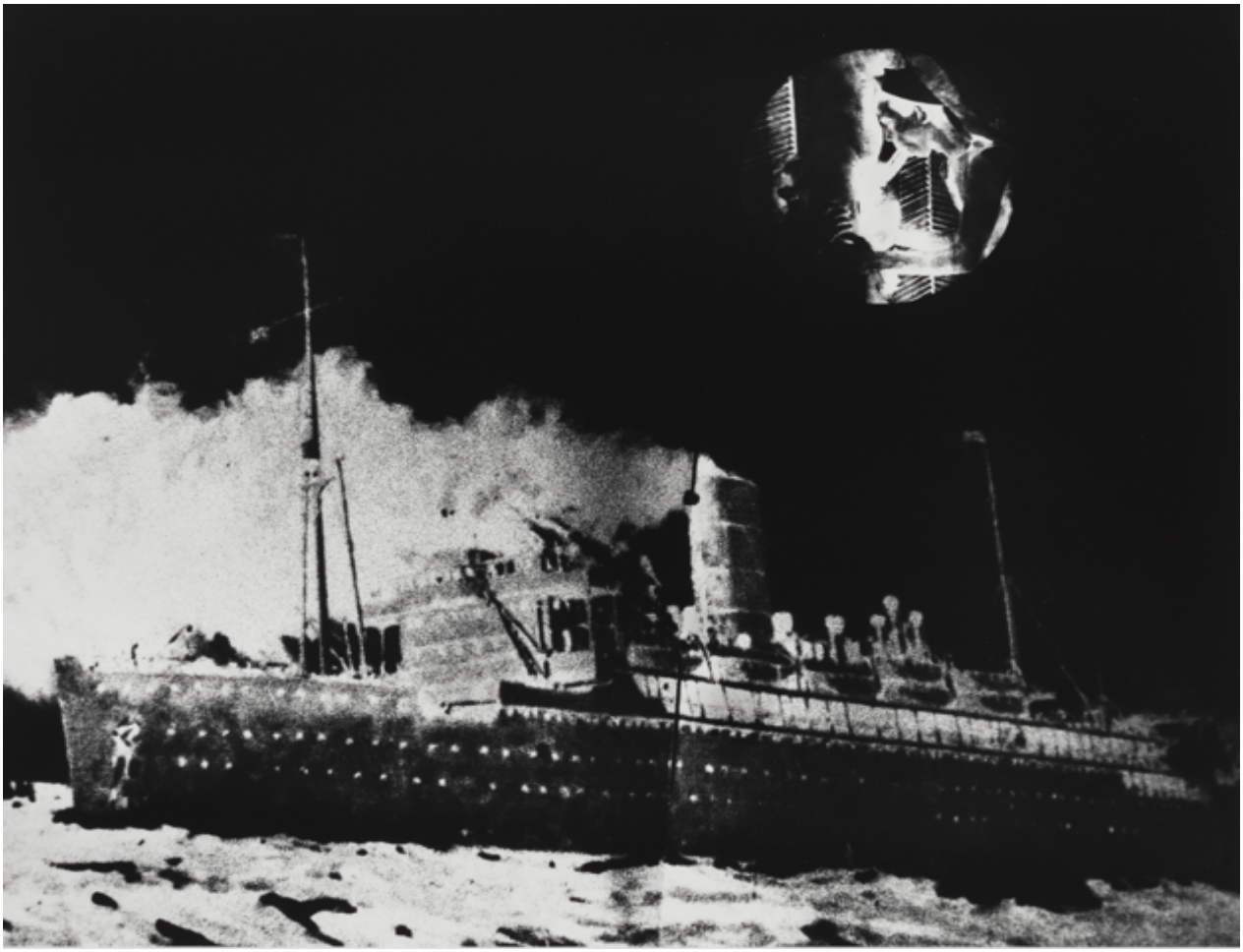

Figure 4:
***Untitled,* from the *Sex Series (for Marion Scemama) (boat)*, 1989**
Gelatin silver print, 16 x 19 13/16 inches

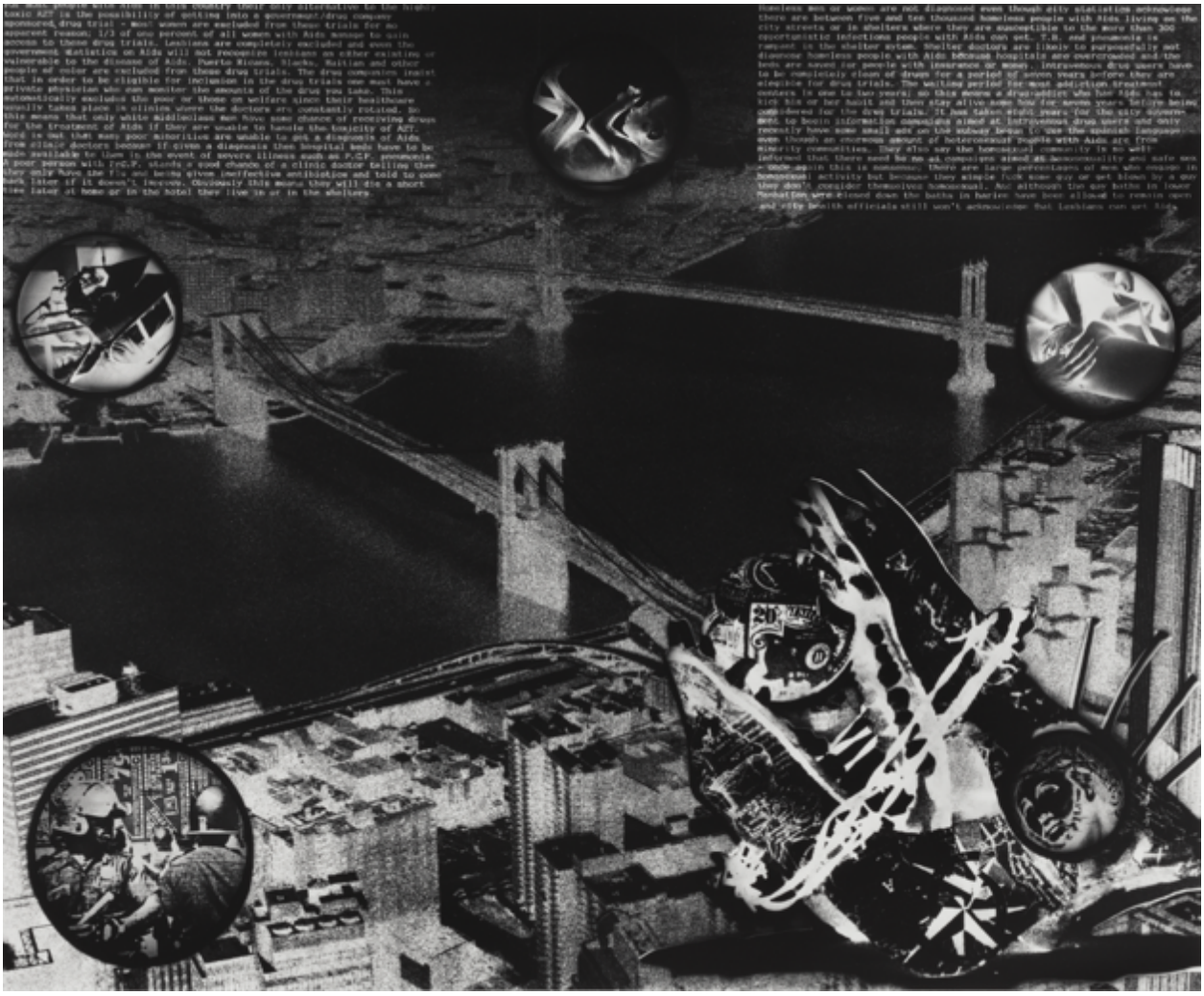

Figure 5:
***Untitled,* from the *Sex Series (for Marion Scemama) (bridge/ skull)*, 1989**
Gelatin silver print, 16 x 19 13/16 inches

Figure 6:
***Untitled,* from the *Sex Series (for Marion Scemama) (trees)*, 1989**
Gelatin silver print, 16 x 19 13/16 inches

Figure 7:
***Untitled,* from the *Sex Series (for Marion Scemama) (bridge)*, 1989**
Gelatin silver print, 16 x 19 13/16 inches

The smaller images illustrate queer narratives, and the larger ones display straight scripts. These normative representations include the state as protector (Figures 1, 3, and 5), the domestic sphere (Figure 2), the public sphere (Figures 5 and 7), rural life (Figure 6), and colonial marked western expansion and ideological imperialism (Figures 3 and 4). All of these photos serve to illustrate how queer desire can be a powerful tool used to interrupt such normative narratives: "By mixing variations of sexual expressions there is the attempt to dismantle structures" (*Brush Fires* 162). However, Figure 8 is especially successful in demonstrating this power. I also like how this one underscores the role of identification in subject formation.

Figure 8 is one of the more complicated images in the series. Here is a piece that combines visual and written rhetoric, which takes the bricolage method up a notch by quilting in another kind of text. The bricolaging imbricates three main parts: a large image, six small circular images, and blocks of written text.

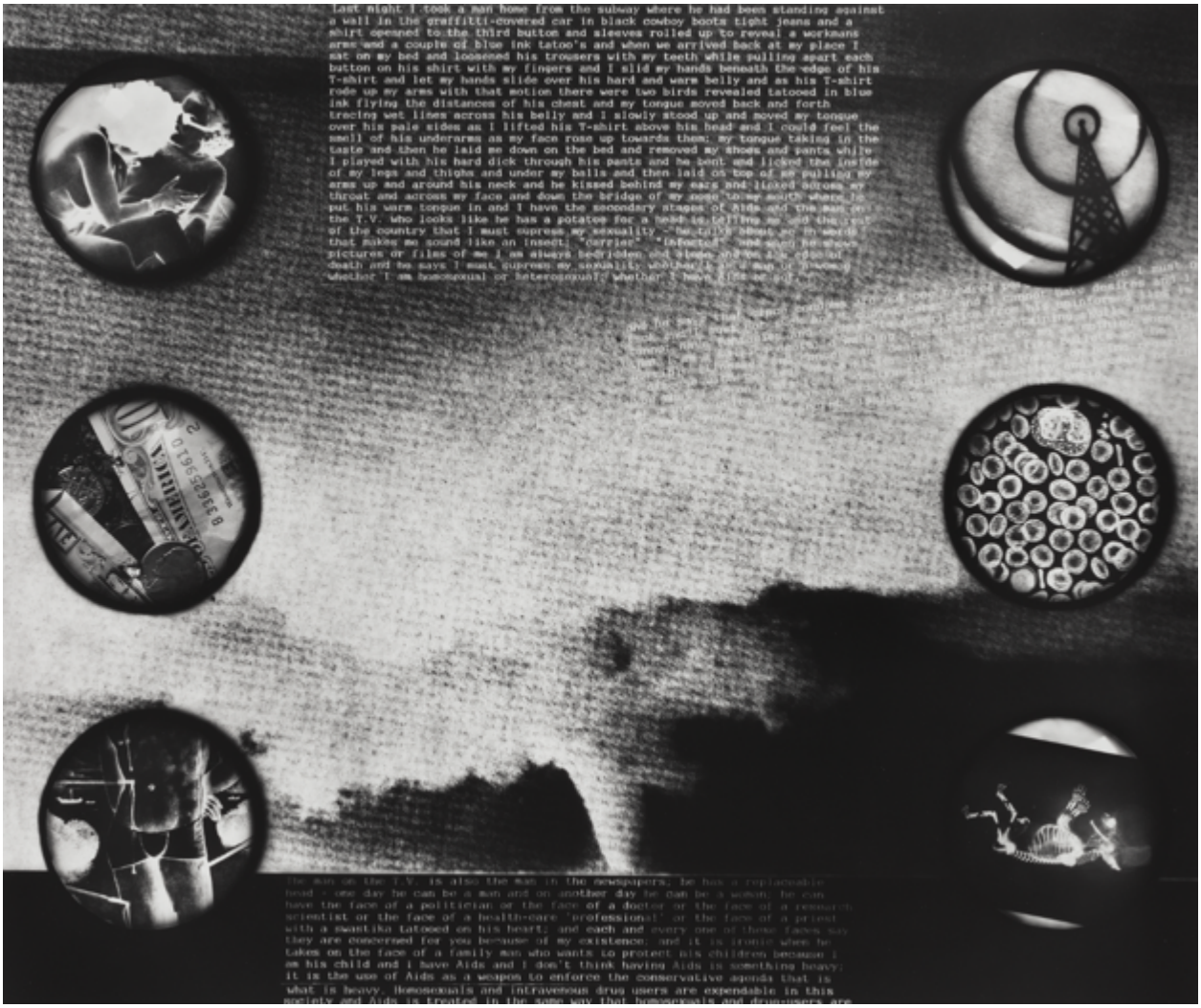

Figure 8:
***Untitled,* from the *Sex Series (for Marion Scemama) (tornado)*, 1989**
Gelatin silver print, 16 x 19 13/16 inches

Precisely what the larger, background image depicts is a bit unclear. It could be read as a nuclear blast. Or maybe it's a volcanic eruption. More likely a tornado. No matter the gloss, this image makes a backdrop that puts the viewer in the mind of powerful forces. The smaller images illustrate lesbian sex, money, an eroticized male figure, a media tower, cells under a microscope, and an X-ray of a human child or primate. The readable written chunks of texts are Wojnarowicz's words. He writes in stream-of-consciousness style about anonymous gay sex, AIDS, and the lies told about AIDS by the media, politicians, and the medical establishment: "Last night I took a man home from the subway where he had been standing against a wall in the graffiti-covered car in black cowboy boots… I have Aids and I don't think having Aids is something heavy; it is the use of Aids as a weapon to enforce the conservative agenda that is what is heavy" (*Brush Fires* 168). By weaving words like these together with images of queer desire and images that conjure hegemonic ideologies, Wojnarowicz illustrates how institutions of power and sexuality are also interlaced together.

The effect of the bricolage shown in Figure 8 demonstrates that though sexuality is shaped, oppressed, and suppressed by a complex network of dominant ideological narratives, queer sexuality has the power to interrupt such narratives. Interruption as a source of subversion leads me to a connection I see between the way Wojnarowicz uses bricolage and what José Esteban Muñoz calls "disidentification." For Muñoz, "Disidentification for the minority subject is a mode of *recycling* or re-forming an object that has already been invested with powerful energy. It is important to emphasize the transformative restructuration of that disidentification" (*Disidentifications* 39). Furthermore, "A disidentification is neither an identification nor a counter-identification—it is a working on, with, and against a form at a simultaneous moment" ("Feeling Brown" 70). It's important to note that the "minority subject" for Muñoz is a different

one from the minority subject for Wojnarowicz. Muñoz is referring to queer and non-queer subjects of color for the most part; whereas, Wojnarowicz's "minority subjects" are most typically, though not solely, white queer subjects. With that caveat, I see elements of disidentification happening in Wojnarowicz's photos. These disidentifications take an identification and transfigure it or the object used as an identifier, all whilst incorporating the original power, force, and influence infused in the original identification—thus using the disidentification for one's own strategies and ends. Sometimes those ends are subversive in nature—like in Wojnarowicz's case—and other times those ends are crystallizing, affirming, or validating in nature.

As an analytic, disidentification can productively translate into thinking about how Wojnarowicz interprets subjectivity. As a queer marginalized subject, Wojnarowicz uses bricolage to recycle dominant ideologies that have "already been invested with powerful energy." For example, in Figure 8 one of the circular images shows a dollar bill, which I read as a representation of unregulated capitalism and American economic world dominance. The other circular images make a similar move, taking power from the media illustrated by the radio tower and from the medical industrial complex shown by the cell and X-ray images. Let's not forget too that Wojnarowicz includes queer sex in this collection of circular images. These sex images are the same size as the other circular ones and organized in a similar manner, which I take to mean that Wojnarowicz gives sex equal billing. By recycling the images and the authority they represent, this photograph shows disidentification in action. Wojnarowicz uses these images and all the power laden in them to tell his own unique story. The particular story I see in this photograph is about intersectionality—another central concept to consider while considering the formation of the subject.

Subjectivity—the ontological experience of being a subject—is never simple, static, or singular for Wojnarowicz. It's always intersectional. Though the ideas addressed by intersectional theory were being engaged with by Black lesbian feminists as early as the 1960's, intersectionality as a term gets coined by legal and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. Intersectional theory looks at the links, overlaps, and convergences among sex, sexuality, gender, race, ability, nationality, and class. Power, privilege, and oppression are also essential elements of intersectional thought; intersectionality, "Approaches lived identities as interlaced and systems of oppression as enmeshed and mutually reinforcing… This 'matrix' worldview contests 'single-axis' forms of thinking about subjectivity and power and reject hierarchies of identity or oppression;" furthermore, it links the "structural and experiential, and the material and discursive, it does not approach different identities or systems of power as 'non-interactive' or independent... Instead, intersectionality examines how power and privilege operate on several levels at once (experiential, epistemological, political, and structural) and across (and within) categories of experience and personhood (including race, gender, sexuality, disability, social class, and citizenship)" (May 3, 23). For me, an absolutely necessary take-away is that intersectionality is an approach that can elucidate how subjects are called into and affected by the systems of power in which they live.

Wojnarowicz's photograph in Figure 8 tells an intersectional story. It tells of a complex subjectivity that exists in a web of power, privilege, and oppression. I see this story by way of the physical overlapping, linking, and converging of images depicting certain ideologies and institutions: gender, sex, the state, economics, the media, and science. The cultural and political context of these smaller photos represent most certainly matters when considering how the artwork plays a significant role in the intersectional story the photograph recounts. For example,

the top left image depicting female sex gains a certain power when considering it is taken during the second-wave feminist sex wars, when feminists were split between the pro-porn and anti-porn camps. When looking at the image of money, situated left middle, it is hard not to consider that in the U.S. during the 1980's Reaganomics is in full effect—this set of economic policies represents a lot of what Wojnarowicz is criticizing: neoliberal tenets that when practiced divest in welfare programs and invest in corporate protections that widen the income gap. The middle right circular image gives yet another view into this time and place: depicting cells under a microscope, of course, brings to mind the HIV/ AIDS epidemic and all the people who were constantly concerned about dwindling T-cell counts.

By evoking these now historic backgrounds, it is easier to parse out the kind of powers and oppressions that intersect in the photo. Taken as a whole, Figure 8 shows we see power put atop other powers, ideologies linking together via bricolage, and identities markers converge as they are represented together on the same page. A matrix worldview is part of this story too, as shown through the collaging. The different images in the photograph, in other words, are not placed in a hierarchical kind of positioning. They are collaged together, which, for me, implies that each of these powers are operating simultaneously. The power of sex, for instance, is at work at the same time as the power of the state—these levels of power are all affecting how the subject is suppressed and oppressed. Wojnarowicz uses this artwork to expose the different vectors of his own subject formation and how they overdetermine his subjectivity.

Looking at it as a whole, the *Sex Series* serves to interrupt a continuity that was present in the U.S. cultural milieu during the height of the AIDS epidemic, a continuity that socially packaged and sold AIDS as the "white gay man's disease," a continuity that worked to reinforce and center privileged, white, heterosexual narratives and demonize and decenter poor, black and

brown, queer narratives. And this continuity is deployed by the very ideologies and systems of power that Wojnarowicz depicts in the photographs: gender norms, mainstream media, the state, the biomedical industry, neoliberalism, capitalism, and the military industrial complex. The images of gay and lesbian sex muck up the cohesion of hegemonic power signified by hyper-masculinity, war, and nationalism. By injecting queer desire into the mainstream straight imagination, his photographs fracture the stability of that imagination.

This act of fracturing one narrative with another is one way Wojnarowicz creates a queer record. This fracturing allows me to see how his methods overlap; in this case, recording and bricolaging imbricate. He produces a queer record by creating bricolaged photographs—together the recording and bricolaging depict the interruptive power of sewing homoerotic narratives into heteronormative ones. As a result, Wojnarowicz constructs a preserved sketch of queer history—it's a complicated illustration showcasing how dominant systems of power can vilify gay desire, while simultaneously creating a representation of queer erotics. The outcome: the erotics interrupt the normative powers that most typically hail the subject into becoming over and over again an institutionalized subject. In order to move toward a kind of disinstitutionalized subjectivity, these fracturing moments are necessary, because they give glimpses of alternative forms of interpellation.

Method #3—Memory

Memory serves as a bookend for me: I began this chapter with my own memories of childhood, and I begin to wrap-up this chapter with Wojnarowicz's memories of childhood. I arrange this way because I see Wojnarowicz's memory work as an alternative-interpellation to

the ideologies that fed my memories—memories I have of learning to be a good kid, a good institutionalized subject. His memories hail me to think about sexuality and gender in divergent ways and memory is another method of creation that he uses to move toward a disinstitutionalized subject.

I also conclude my discussion of his methods with memory because of the great potential it holds: memory can help recover queer histories too often left behind. Memory can even engender new histories. Like interpellation, memory is a mechanism, one that helps to constitute both the individual subject and communal subjectivities. Importantly, memory is not a rolodex of perfectly or even imperfectly stored moments in time. It's not a stagnant archive. Rather, memory is a fluid, moving target. It's creative and imaginative.[9] It's a (re)invented past that serves the present. Because of its potential to reinvent subject experience, memory plays a pivotal role in "making and breaking queer worlds," and for this reason memories can be understood as a "socially transformative medium" (Castiglia and Reed 71, 11).

In *If Memory Serves: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Promise of the Queer Past*, Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed make valuable contributions to memory theory and advancements in how it connects to AIDS and subjectivity. I am especially drawn to the way they demonstrate how memory has transformative potential: "memories of loss sited in the past may become occasions for the invention of idealistic futures" (175). By drawing an idealistic kind of relationship between the past and the future—especially in the wake of queer theory's

[9] Considering that most of Wojnarowicz's work is memoir in nature, it's worth making a note here about the kinds of connections scholars have made between selfhood, memoir, memory, and the making of memories. A go-to text for me on this conversation is Paul John Eakin's *In How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves.* This reading helped me understand that, "past experience is necessarily—both psychologically and neurologically—constructed anew in each memory event or act of recall. Memories, then, are constructed, and memory itself, moreover, is plural" (107), and, furthermore, that, "self, memory, and the body are intimately connected" (19).

anti-social[10] and the anti-futurity[11] trends —they take a debatable position. On the one side of the debate, Lee Edelman urges queers to: "Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized," because as much as we'd "like to believe that with patience, with work, with generous contributions to lobbying groups… and electoral sophistication, the future will hold a place for us… there are no *queers* in that future as there can be no future for queers" (29-30). So, for Edelman, it's not that the future is not idealistic for queers, it simply does not exist. While on the other side, José Esteban Muñoz tells queers that they: "must vacate the here and now for a then and there" because "we need to step out of the rigid conceptualization that is a straight present… what we need to know is that queerness is not yet here but it approaches like a crashing wave of potentiality" (*Cruising* 185). I think it's important to call attention to the idea that the anti-futurity and pro-futurity standpoints agree that queerness is a position that has unique and special aptitude; however—as represented by Edelman and Muñoz, two towering voices of the debate—the sides unequivocally disagree about the role of the future for queer theory and for queer subjects. Castiglia and Reed side with the opinion that queerness is not vacant in the future, which is an important aspect to consider when taking in how and why they use memory theory.

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[10] The anti-social turn or thesis in queer theory is often thought to have been initiated by Leo Bersani in the early 1990's. The thesis "asserts that queer sex epitomizes the self-shattering, anticommunitarian death drive that queers have historically represented in Western culture" (Castiglia and Reed 157). This turn marks a shift from first-wave to second-wave queer theory, from a queer theory that sought to repair the queer subject and the past to a queer theory that rejects reparations and values trauma from the past. This part of queer theory embraces ideas that gays and queers are destructive to the fabric of society.

[11] Coming on the heels of the anti-social turn is its cousin anti-futurity. This concept is initiated by Lee Edelman and proliferates in the queer theory conversation from the 2006 *PMLA* Conference. Anti-futurity explains that the child is used in western culture as a symbol of a hopeful and normative future. Queers and queer sexualities are an opposing symbol, then, that represent the idea that putting stock in the future is disillusioned and that faith should rather be put into today.

Castiglia and Reed take up the anti-social turn and futurity debate by way of memory. They see memory and remembering as ways to tap into queerness as a site of great potential for queer communities, past and future. They make the point that such potential is too often forgotten, and, thus, personal and communal memory are transformative modes of recovery for transform subjectivities of the present. In taking up the complexities of gay memory and the phenomenon of unremembering, they explain that:

> The sweeping calls to unremember targeted the generation hardest hit by the onset of AIDS, cutting that generation off from younger gays and lesbians who might continue the visionary work undertaken in the late 1960's and 1970's. We call this temporal isolation *de-generation*. It is a process destructive of both a generation of social revolutionaries and the transgenerational bonds that make the transmission of revolutionary projects and cultures across and against time possible. De-generational unremembering is not simply an assault on the past or an attempt at prophylactic projection of the future, then; it is, above all, an aggressive assault on possibilities for the queer present. (9)

Castiglia and Reed delineate the effects of unremembering here—not only is queer past erased by this phenomenon, but queer present[12] is also threatened. Queer present is a value in its own right, of course; it is also, however, an essential part of feminist present, which is another reason why I am invested in the way Wojnarowicz helps rectify the temporal isolation of de-generation

[12] No doubt worth noting as an aside here an idea claimed by queer theorist Lauren Berlant: "the present is perceived, first, affectively: the present is what makes itself present to us before it becomes anything else, such as an orchestrated collective event or a epoch on which we can look back... if the present is not at first an object but a mediated affect, it is also a thing that is sensed and under constant revision, a temporal genre whose conventions emerge from the personal and public filtering of the situations and events that are happening in an extended now whose very parameters.... are also always there for debate" (4).

by depicting the violence it does. He also uses creative memory as a method to combat this threat. To parse this out, I turn now to *Close to the Knives* because housed there are memoirs that are especially successful at using memory as a "socially transformative medium."

There's a section in *Close to the Knives* that uses memory as preservation: Wojnarowicz uses both his own recollections and those of his friends to preserve the life of their shared friend, Dakota. He first introduces the reader to Dakota three quarters through the book in an "Author's Note." He explains that:

> In the following pages, I originally included segments of letters I'd received over the years from the guy named Dakota. They were letters filled with a terrible beauty outlining in words a fierce attempt to experience freedom and that elusive thing we call life in all its diversity and variousness. They were letters pertaining to his sexuality… his desires for a structure of his own choosing… I chose these letters because they were the only surviving pieces of evidence that allowed Dakota to speak on his own behalf. (163)

Notice the word "originally." Wojnarowicz goes onto explain that though wanting to include the letters Dakota had written to him before suiciding, he was legally prevented from doing so, due to copyright law. Wojnarowicz contacted Dakota's family for permission; however:

> Dakota's life work—his writing, screenplays, drawings, paintings, collages, photographs, and musical recordings—were destroyed by the parents… [creating] a whitewash of personal histories. In the case of Dakota, his entire identity has been murdered by his folks. What fragments of his existence survive, in letters received by friends, are made invisible by the State in the form of this [copyright] law. (164)

Because he was legally prevented from including Dakota's letters, his voice, his art, his recording, Wojnarowicz writes a chapter, "The Suicide of a Guy Who Once Built an Elaborate Shrine Over a Mouse Hole," that remembers Dakota, as way to preserve memory of him and prevent his personal history from vanishing.

In this chapter, Wojnarowicz records Dakota's life through what I read as a bricolaged mode of epistolary writing: he uses prose, dreams, journal excerpts, tape recordings, quotes, proverbs, and phone calls. Again, then, his methods overlap—this chapter brings together Wojnarowicz's use of queer record-making, bricolaging, and creative memory. He tells the chapter's aims:

> I am building a monument made of fragments of love and hate, sadness and feelings of murder. This monument serves as a shrine where innocence is slowly having its belly slit open, its heart removed, its eyes plucked out, its tongue severed, its fingers broken, its legs torn off. At the base of this shrine I place the various elements that define each person who has died or is dying. (166)

The structure of the physical body is being dismantled here; an image that brings to mind the disintegration of a diseased or dead body. However, while the body is being torn apart something else is being built. Wojnarowicz is helping to build and preserve memory through the shrine he describes. The reader knows from the "Author's Note" that Dakota is one of the people at the base of the shrine. A memory of Dakota is built, and a queer history is preserved. This act of memory building is essential to Wojnarowicz's work. Creative memory use allows him to (re)build narratives that are being torn down around him: stories about queers, stories about people living with AIDS, stories about people dying from its complications, stories about gay men who are being erased by an institutionalized society that fears and hates them.

Dakota sits at the foundation of the shrine Wojnarowicz is building. Dakota is his case study, just as Wojnarowicz is mine. He makes records in the late 20th-century in order to build a monument, securing queer history from being forgotten, a history that was being killed by an epidemic of misinformation, fear, and hysteria. I record Wojnarowicz today to build a shrine, hoping that the methods he fostered do not get forgotten, because using his methods help me rethink subject formation in the name of feminist present.

When considering the refashioning power of memory, Wojnarowicz's *Memories that Smell like Gasoline* is a necessary text to open—not only does memory play a thematically central role in this memoir, but the book also helps clarify the connection between memory and subject constitution. I also look at this particular text because it holds a distinctive place in Wojnarowicz's archive. Most of his work and the memories he writes about relay his adult experiences as a queer man living with HIV/ AIDS. In *Memories that Smell like Gasoline*, however, he recalls memories from his youth. When he was fifteen years old, Wojnarowicz was raped:

> He treats me like he owns me. I'm stuck in a drift, lost, no hope, or anything familiar. Maybe now I'll get relief, maybe he'll crush my skull or strangle me. Suddenly I recall something from earlier when he loosened my belt and dragged my pants down to my calves and smacked me as hard as he could and it hurt so bad I tried to make it sexual I tried to imagine it was gentle or that he was somebody sexy or that I was a mile away walking in the opposite direction. Oh hit me I said trying to act like I was into it so maybe he'd get bored. Turning over and over and over what the fuck is he doing that for? He lunges and reaches far into the darkness of the truck and I hear a container of liquid, sounds like a

> metal container and liquid sounds the image of lighter fluid or gasoline went through my mind. Is this is? I could see flames; I could see my body being turned over by campers looking like a side of beef left too long in the fire, black and charred with bones poking out of it. I felt the squirt of liquid all over my ass, a memory smell from childhood flooding the truck. Baby oil. I just want to die, I just want to die, I just want to die… in the codes that I carry in the sleepy part of my head, personal histories can turn on a dime and either rush away into disintegration or else speed toward me looking to envelop… All my history and language had suddenly been erased. (24-6)

This passage relays a mood of isolation and fragmentation. The change of color on the physical page textures the mood. On the physical page the words go from black to muddy red and back to black again—signifying a back and forth, a momentary slip into something different. A sketch on the page adds yet another layer to this texturing. The rape narrative being described in the written text is in tension with this sketch: Wojnarowicz's drawing is of consensual male erotica, illustrated by the body language of the drawn figures. This tension serves to emphasize how violence, isolation, and destruction are in tandem with desire for Wojnarowicz.

Years after the rape when he unintentionally runs into his rapist Wojnarowicz is triggered to recall this traumatic memory. During the unfortunate chance encounter Wojnarowicz does not confront the man who raped him. He shrinks; his "history and language" become erased; this moment of recall dislocates him from discourse. This dislocation speaks to the transformative—and even transgressive—power of memory. I find it especially noteworthy that Wojnarowicz's language, because of the traumatic memory, is erased because language and discourse are the most powerful of all interpellaters. Because David is released from his discursive reality, even if

it is only for one red moment, I read this scene in *Memories that Smell like Gasoline* as one that illustrates how memory can resist ubiquitous modes of interpellation. Counterintuitively, from this loss-inducing moment of trauma, then, something fruitful happens: interpellation deteriorates.

In an unexpected way, Wojnarowicz's memory, then, aligns with Castiglia and Reed's claim that memory is an "act of resistance" (11). For Castiglia and Reed memory is an act of resistance because it has the power to be reparative, and I think Wojnarowicz illustrates this, but also complicates it. Wojnarowicz's memory brings together ideas from both sides of debate around the anti-social turn: it illustrates that fragmentation can be reparative, while also forwarding that that which is reparative is not necessarily anti-queer. Wojnarowicz complicates memory as a reparative mechanism, by demonstrating that it can be disruptive, disorganizing, and fragmenting.

In Sum—Why Feminist Critique Should Take Note of the Disinstitutionalized Subject

Wojnarowicz's methods—record-making, bricolage, and memory—give a new narrative of subject formation. His narrative of subject formation is both queer and tells of a subject that is disinstitutionalized. This disinstitutionalized subject is not quite a bad subject, nor does it hope to be, because "Even the 'bad subjects' are trapped—perhaps more than the others" (Balibar). Wojnarowicz's narratives don't show me how to be a bad subject, rather they illustrate how I can be a subject less dogged by the "passionate pursuit of the reprimanding recognition of the state" (Butler, *Psychic Life* 129). In writing about Althusser's subject, Judith Butler explores the potential value of failed interpellation: "Such a failure of interpellation may well undermine the

capacity of the subject to 'be' in a self-identical sense, but it may also mark the path toward a more open, even more ethical, kind of being, one of or for the future" (*Psychic Life* 131). For Butler, then, at least one optimistic view of subject formation is one that involves failed interpellation. I appreciate the connections she makes, and I'm inspired by her notions. Butler helps me understand the transformative power of interpellation. I can't stop but wonder though if failed interpellation misses the opportunity to capitalize on the mechanism's power. That power should not be wasted. But is should be used divergently. I see disinstitutionalization as a prospect that occurs not from failed interpellation but from an alternative interpellation.

Althusser used a narrative situation to explain interpellation. His "Hey, you" narrative explains that the subject is hailed by state ideologies, by institutional ideologies. Wojnarowicz also uses narrative to explain interpellation, but in his story queer desire calls out "hey, you." In this case, I was glad to turn. Lesson learned. I'm glad to find and apprehend alternative modes of interpellation in order to imagine and live alternative, disinstitutionalized narratives—narratives that are not controlled by patriarchal state apparatuses.

I have argued that Wojnarowicz's methods—tools that creatively use recording, bricolage, and memory—speak to ways subjects can have more power over the process of subject formation. In order for this process to be transformed, a great deal more pressure need be applied to the ways subjects are constructed. As it stands, subjects are constructed by way of a form of interpellation that is state-sanctioned. It's sterilized and heterosexualized. The process of subject formation that works through this dominant brand of interpellation produces an unaffected, sex-negative, sex-regressive subject. By turning to Wojnarowicz's artwork, what my intervention, then, adds to conversations about the subject and its constitution is the emergence

of a new subject—a subject who refuses to answer to the state's call, a subject to hears and answers to the call of desire: the disinstitutionalized subject.

As a feminist I want to invest in methods of creation that make it so subjects are able to answer to the call of an interpellation that does not require identification with straight, normative, culture and instead is energized by queerness and desire. Answering to this kind of call produces a subject that is more sex-positive, more sexually transgressive. Wojnarowicz's archive provides a design that outlines an alternative subject formation and resulting subject. His archive and the methods demonstrated there illustrate a redoing of how a subject is hailed. This is a redoing worthy of attention for contemporary queer feminist practitioners, because it shows a process of subject constitution that is driven by sexuality and desire rather than by patriarchal institutions of power. His archive models ways in which such a subject may be constituted, ways that are necessarily steeped in erotic imagination. Wojnarowicz's methods explore the possibility of a specific kind of radical subject: the disinstitutionalized subject, a subject called by queer desire, and, perhaps most importantly, his methods show me that erotics can open new forms of interpellation. I am inspired by feminist scholar Sara Ahmed in teasing out the implications of this redoing of interpellation and consequently a transformation of the subject from an institutionalized one—a subject that answers the call of classic interpellation—to a disinstitutionalized one—a subject who answers the call of desire and erotics. One of the central interventions Ahmed makes in *Living a Feminist Life* explains "that the histories that bring us to feminism are the histories that leave us fragile" (162). What changes for me about Ahmed's insight that "histories that hurt bring us to feminism" (178) now that I have a grasp on a model of a disinstitutionalized subject from Wojnarowicz is that I see that interpellations that hurt also bring us to feminism. In other words, one of the less fortunate reasons feminism is necessary is

heteropatriarchal interpellations. Turning, then, to Wojnarowicz is important for feminist critique today because his artwork and the methods it uses model alternative interpellations that have the power to engender a bad subject.

For Althusser a "bad subject" is one who can, "on occasion provoke the intervention of one of the detachments of the (Repressive) State Apparatus" (269), and the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA) include the government, the army, the police, prisons, the courts, and administration. In other words, the "bad subject" is one who fails to answer the call of classic interpellation by not turning toward an RSA. Though I find this possibility extremely attractive, I do not, ultimately, believe it to be possible because, let's not forget, of course, that, "ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects," and so individuals are all, "*always-already subjects*" (265). Given the inescapable position of the subject as always-already and considering the power of interpellation to keep the subject in that position, what I do believe possible are alternative forms of interpellation. Subjects can turn toward hailings other than those made by heteropatriarchal, sexist, queerphobic, straight state apparatuses that are bound by normalizing rhetorics. If we are to become unbound, alternative interpellations are necessary and necessarily charged by desire and queerness.

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CHAPTER 2:

DESIRING EROTIC TRANSGRESSION: A PATH TOWARD CONTACT RELATIONALITY & BEYOND IDENTITY IN SAMUEL DELANY'S *THE MAD MAN*

"*The self is defined by—and lives in terms of—its relations with others.*"
-Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*

The Conversation—Debating Connections

The mechanisms that work to build and maintain institutions of power ultimately constitute and shape the subject—for this reason I want to put focus on those mechanisms in order to imagine a revised process of subject formation. Spot lighting and putting pressure on those mechanisms ideally can lead to imagining ways for the subject to gain more agency in her sense of self. The basic idea is this: modify the mechanisms, and as a consequence, advantageously amend the subject and her subjectivity. I find this prospect especially attractive as a way to engender a subject experience less bound to institutional powers—forces like heteropatriarchy, racism, and classism—that oppress and restrict the subject from growing or becoming outside of those institutions. In chapter one, I discussed how queer desire could produce alternative modes of interpellation, the powerful hailing mechanism. In this chapter, I focus on how eroticized transgressions can produce human connections that do not rely on recognition, and in so doing, I turn my attention to another key mechanism at play during subject construction: relationality.

Relationality is a ubiquitous mechanism, an apparatus that is everywhere and always at work. It's how and why subjects form relationships with each other, their communities, and their ideologies. It organizes social structures and assembles ways of thinking. Most simply, it can be defined as the ways in which we connect to, understand, and make relationships with each other.

A relational model[13] understands that we come into social, political, and cultural being in collaboration with other subjects—it's an "I connect to others, therefore I am" kind of idea.

In order to fully flesh out relationality, I begin somewhat circuitously with antirelationality. The antirelational turn arguably begins with Leo Bersani in his foundational essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" and continues in his book *Homos*. In these texts, Bersani claims that understanding gay communities or gay politics as utopian is both overly sentimental and downright problematic, thus formulating his antirelational theory. His theory asks queer theorists to "rethink what we mean and what we expect from communication, and from community" (*Homos* 181). This kind of rethinking, he claims, can be done by way of, "*homo-ness* [because it] *necessitates a massive redefining of relationality*" (76). For Bersani, then, gay sexual pleasure can be a way to understand and do social connections differently, doing them antirelationally, to be specific. He explains that there is great power in gay desire because it can disrupt societal systems:

> If homosexuality is a privileged vehicle for homo-ness, the latter designates a mode of connectedness to the world that it would be absurd to reduce to sexual preference. An anticommunal mode of connectedness we might all share, or a new way of coming together: that, and not assimilation into already constituted communities, should be the goal of any adventure in bringing out, and celebrating, 'the homo' in all of us. (10)

[13] The phrasing and idea here behind the "relational model" is in part animated by Paul John Eakin in *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*. However, whereas Eakin claims that, "*all* identity is relational" (43), I use relational models of being as a way to move away from identity.

Hence, Bersani advocates a kind of connectedness that rejects assimilative tendencies, that does not rely on pre-made communities, that does not require identification, and so is organized around differences rather than similarities—in a nutshell, this is his antirelationality.

Judith Butler is another influential voice in the relationality conversation, most especially when it comes to recognition and identification, as she considers psychological relations between people. She argues that identifications:

> Can ward off certain desires or act as vehicles for desire; in order to facilitate certain desires, it may be necessary to ward off others: identification is the site at which this ambivalent prohibition and production of desire occurs. If to assume a sex is in some sense an 'identification,' then it seems that identification is a site at which prohibition and deflection are insistently negotiated. To identify with a sex is to stand in some relation to an imaginary threat. (*Bodies That Matter* 100)

Though she does not use the term "relationality," Butler is deeply invested here in how subjects relate to each other. According to this Butler passage, desire is a central way for that relation to happen, and desire is tied up with identification, because a subject's ability to identify with another subject can either facilitate or prohibit desire. I argue that relationality is also tied up with desire; however, unlike identification, relationality does not require subject-to-subject identification to facilitate want. In other words, I claim that identification tends to be more prohibitive and relationality more permissive when it comes to desire, and markedly so when it comes to queer desire.

In *Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theories Defiant Subjects*, Mari Ruti contends that: "Butler unwittingly participates in our culture's habitual glorification of the virtues of

relationality" by operating "within a binaristic conceptual frame that deems autonomy to be bad and relationality to be good" (82). For Ruti, Butler and Bersani—and other theorists who tend to agree with Bersani's antirelational position, like Lee Edelman and Slavoj Žižek—represent the two sides of this "binaristic conceptual frame," which is a key configuration to many conversations in contemporary queer theory. Though she mostly takes Butler to task—claiming that she is both "uncritical" of relationality and that she vilifies autonomy—it is the lack of nuance caused by binary polarization with which she most has issue. These theorists, she explains, "rely on a rigid dichotomy between antirelationality and relationality, even if they fall on opposite sides of the divide" (81). In this respect, I agree with Ruti; the divide is overly reductive and does not give relationality the critical analysis it deserves.

José Esteban Muñoz complicates the antirelationality/relationality debate. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*—a text that has become a staple for many of us in queer studies—he makes a productively nuanced anti-antirelationality stance, claiming that collectivity, futurity, and affect are particularly valuable in how we understand and make human connections. His modes of queer critique depend on: "Critical practices that stave off the failures of imagination that [can be understood as] antirelationality and antiutopianism" (*Cruising* 18). Muñoz certainly does not lack thoughtful, analytical imagination—and I am especially drawn to his creative queer critiques of art, culture, and queer theory itself that complicate relationality in ways that open a space for various kinds of relationality, including those intimately connected to race and affect. In fact, his work thankfully and necessarily calls out the ways in which antirelational queer thinking has worked to ignore race and other markers of difference: "Antirelational approaches to queer theory are romances of the negative, wishful thinking, and investments in deferring various dreams of difference" (11). Muñoz, then, productively

complicates the antirelationality versus relationality debate that has influenced so much of queer theory over the last quarter century, and one of the takeaways from his brilliant imaginings that I am galvanized by is the notion that relationality as a mechanism that shapes subject formation and subjectivity comes in multiple forms, some, perhaps, even more valuable than others.

I want to take up this idea of multiple relationalities by narrowing in on two kinds of connecting, which I define by way of what Samuel R. Delany refers to as the "network" and "contact" models of social practice. I like what Muñoz says about relationality because of the way he multiplies relationality into relationalities. However, I want to tweak the direction Muñoz goes a bit by combining his stance with Delany's contact model of connection idea—the result of this tweaking and amalgamating is what I refer to as *contact relationality*. Essentially, I take guidance from Delany and interpret his network and contact models as different kinds of relationalities in the Muñozian sense. In doing so, I frame and define contact relationality as a specific variety of subject-to-subject connection. Contact relationality allows for people to relate to each other in ways that rely on exposure to otherness, on that which is divergent from self. In so doing, then, this kind of connection is both generated from and facilities disidentification[14]. It is this blending together of Muñozian and Delanian concepts that allows me to explore radical subjectivities—opening up new ways of connecting, and, again, these "new ways" are what I am calling contact relationality. My working definition of contact relationality: a noun that describes

[14] Disidentification is another Muñozian concept; though it's a nuanced idea, I think it can be understood in three overlapping ways: First: "Disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 11). Second: "Disidentification for the minority subject is a mode of *recycling* or re-forming an object that has already been invested with powerful energy. It is important to emphasize the transformative restructuration of that disidentification" (Muñoz, Disidentifications, 39). Third: "A disidentification is neither an identification nor a counter-identification—it is a working on, with and against [identification]" (Muñoz, "Feeling Brown: Ethnicity" 70).

a form of connection or a way of connecting to people that serves to give a subject a sense of self, or subjectivity, that is not solely contingent on identity. The way of connecting is one that specifically and necessarily comes out of the mingling of people from different races, genders, classes, and/ or sexual orientations. In this way, this form of connection invests in human connection founded on differences and divests from relationships sourced from sameness.

Contact relationality allows the subject access to subjectivity in novel and profound ways; it is a queer mode of self-authorship. I am invested in this specific kind of relationality as a mode of connection that has the potential to alter subjection—"literally, the *making* of a subject" (Butler, *Psychic Life* 84)—in the name of opening up ways to experience personhood beyond identity. What's at stake for me in engineering new modes of subject formation is that doing so gives subjects access to having more agency over their sense of self.

There are a couple issues at stake for me here that relate to the differences between identity and relationality. First, I want to play out a situation in which identity politics are not quite so commanding. As subjects, as citizens, as queers I don't think we should be so reliant on needing to share a membership card—which identity politics often requires—in order to relate to or care for each other politically, morally, or sexually. Being less reliant on identity politics means queers can build alliances around both divergent and shared experiences and ideologies rather than solely on the latter. It's simply not productive to pit "my difference against your difference," especially given that queers "are more dangerous politically without an analyzable identity" (Bersani, "Gay Betrayals" 37-38). Moreover, something else that is at stake for me is bound up in subjectivity. It's critical that subjects obtain more agency of their sense of self because such a shift can take power away from dominant institutions of power—institutions that

function on and uphold racism, classism, sexism, and queerphobia—and put that agency-fueled power under the guardianship of individuals.

The reason, then, why subjectivity is valuable is because with it comes the ability of the subject to have more influence over their own narratives; subjectivity gives the subject more control over the mechanisms that are always already contracting it; subjectivity gives the subject agency to self-create. I want more ways to gain access to subjectivity—contact relationality is one of those ways. Queer desire and sex—sexual want and fucking that violate what conventional social norms say sex should be or look like—is a way to experience contact relationality, making queer desire and sex a tool of great potential. What might this look like? Well, Delany helps illustrate such a world.

Delany is writing about relationality—how people and communities relate and connect to each other—in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue.* In this highly acclaimed text, Delany defines the two different modes of connection: network and contact. Though he refers to network and contact modes as social practices, not as modes of relationality, I am interpreting them this way because, as Delany lays out with great care, network and contact are two different ways for people to come together. *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* contextualizes both individual connections and community connections in terms of these two kinds of social practices. The social practices result in two kinds of communities: one, according to Delany, is healthy and preferable and the other is divisive, corporate, and ultimately pernicious.

He sheds light on these two types of communities by illustrating very different Times Squares—one is situated in the late 1970s to the mid-1990s and the other after the 1996 New York City renovations. The first picture shows a community with a variety of city-dwellers, porn theaters, public sex, and sex work. The other picture is void of sex, and in its place is a Disney

store, tourists pouring in and out of it, only to return to their suburban homes. This second Times Square is one that is, "Predominately a middle-class area for entertainment, to which the working classes are welcome to come along, observe, and take part in, if they can pay and are willing to blend in" (160). This space reflects a community that practices what Delany refers to as the "network" mode or model of social practice. He explains that networking communities, "Start by gathering a population all with the same or relatively similar needs" (169). The network community space cuts the city up in such a way that does not promote or allow for contact relationality, like the old Times Square did. A network model defines the role of community as competitive and driven by identity politics.

Unlike a network relationality represented by the new Times Square, the old Times Square demonstrated connections organized around the contact social practice. This kind of relationality promotes and proliferates cross-race and cross-class interactions: "Contact tends to be more broadly social… [it] regularly crosses class lines in those public spaces in which interclass encounters are at their most frequent" (129). Connecting this way thrives on and promotes difference, rather than sameness. It's grounded on relationships that are not heteronormative, are not capitalist-normative, and notably these relationships are both valid and necessary. To be clear, then, a relationality based on contact social practices is legitimate, healthy, and queer.

Delany demonstrates how newer capitalist institutions—like Disney—replace older institutions—like local porn theaters—and with this replacement the intermingling of unlike sexual desires, races, and classes is lessened. In other words, contact relationality is lost via the change of institutions Delany describes. Given his portrait of a city, and by implication a country, he cautions Americans against dismantling institutions that facilitate social practices

that work through contact modes of relationality. He argues that there must be "a constant renovation of the concept of discourse" in order to preserve or reestablish contact promoting institutions (112). In the context of the 1980s and mid 1990s, I don't disagree with Delany. That context is dead, however. The physical institutions Delany promoted—places like the peep shows and the porn theaters and the bath houses—are all but gone, many having been killed off by state and city ordinances put in place to ostensibly make people "safe" from AIDS. This does not mean, however, that contact relationality was closed down too.

What does it mean though for contact social practices to occur outside of the kinds of institutions Delany promoted? If those institutions are gone, or at least are so heavily manufactured and policed to be functionally unavailable, having been replaced by sanitized, neoliberal institutions, where and how do we now practice contact relationality? If Delany relied on institutions, albeit queer ones, to keep contact social practices alive and those kinds of institutions are all but disappeared, leaving in their remains institutions fueled by racist, capitalist, heteropatriarchal ideologies, I'm wondering if today a kind of transgression needs to happen in order to make contact. I turn to Delany's novel *The Mad Man* to help me answer these inquiries. My analysis of this text allows me to vector together a contact relationality that does not rely on pernicious institutions or on social arrangements that depend on notions of identity. My aim in this matrixing is to better grasp contact relationality as a means of centering variance in a subjectivity that is not reliant on identity—this kind of reframing of subjectivity and subject formation is an aim I think should be central to feminisms today.

Some of Delany's books have been considered feminist by both academic and popular audiences; most notably, his bestselling science fiction novel *Dhalgren* (1975) has been read as a feminist text for the ways it illustrates round female characters and gives a critical view of

conventional gender roles. Delany himself has made it clear that feminist issues are crucial: "The most important political problem in the modern world is the position of women. I think all of the other oppressions—whether it be homophobia, whether it be racism, or what have you—are all modeled on the oppression of women…and if it is not changed in some way, we are not going to survive as a species. It's as simple as that" (*The Mary Sue*, 2:14-2:47). Though Delany's thinking is obviously invested in feminist concerns, after much digging, I cannot, however, find anything feminist that has been written about *The Mad Man* specifically. Despite this lack, or maybe even in part because of it, I think the novel certainly warrants being interpreted via a critical feminist lens. I read it as feminist because of the way it exemplifies contact relationality for me. Contact relationality as a means toward imaging radical subjectivities must be an endeavor for contemporary queer feminist work. *The Mad Man* outlines what contact relationality looks like. In other words, then, this novel of Delany's is a sample roadmap illustrating how we can connect to each other in meaningful ways that help to inform and cultivate self-authorship. The text serves as a map in that it illustrates how sexual transgression can act as a kind of conduit for contact relationality. Put simply, *The Mad Man* can help bring contact relationality to queer feminist study.

As one of America's most prolific 20th-century authors, Delany has published dozens of fiction and dozens of non-fiction works. One thing I find striking about his body of work is actually not its size but rather its diversity. The genres he writes in span from novel to memoir, from graphic works to short stories, from ethnographic study to literary criticism. He writes science fiction, fantasy stories, love narratives, erotic tales, and some pretty gritty pornography. He writes about AIDS, about sex and sexuality, about memory, and class, and race, and mythology. It's a lot.

One reason *The Mad Man* is such a special part of his oeuvre is that in it there is a convergence of many of these genres, forms, and topics. For instance, *The Mad Man* is a novel but has autobiographical elements, as well. Its focus on class politics and homelessness also make it a piece of realism: "Samuel Delany explores the ambiguous relations between the erotics of urban life and postmodern capitalism. To an important extent, the novel suggests, certain modes of urban queer eroticism might be seen as embedded alternatives to dominant modes of late capitalist sociality" (Davidson 13). However, amidst the realism, fantasy and mythology also make guest appearances, most notably by way of the beast character that is both racially and sexually charged—the novel begins with its description: "Black, raddled, roped with veins, it rose like a charred tallboy from snarled bronze. Below, the texture and color of overripe avocados, testicles hung like rocks" (*The Mad Man* 1). Though it makes infrequent showings, this creature that is saturated in sexuality and racial markers tells the reader right off the bat that *The Mad Man* is a novel about erotic yearnings, about the ways in which race and desire inform each other, and about "people [who] are honest about their desires" (Bucher and Dickel 297).

Though there are epistolary moments when the reader has access to letters written by other characters, the story is predominately narrated by John. He's a Philosophy graduate student who is researching the life, work, and death of his mentor Timothy Hasler, a brilliant philosopher and sci-fi writer who was murdered at 29 years old. Readers follow John—a Black man with a piss fetish from a middle-class background—through his time working on his doctoral thesis; researching Hasler; and cruising porn theaters, city parks, and gay bars in New York City during the early days of the AIDS crisis. Much of the text, really, is about the connections he makes during this time. The way the text follows John's life and growth make way for Christian Ravela to argue that although *The Mad Man* can be considered a bildungsroman, with the notable caveat

that it: “Revises the ideological tenets of the classical bildungsroman through the figure of the racialized homeless…the novel takes up the narrative conventions of the classical bildungsroman in order to unthink the liberal constraints of freedom and belonging established by possessive individualism” (92-3). It’s relatively easy to categorize the novel as a bildungsroman—John Marr, the protagonist, is the character whose “development [from a] subject into an autonomous ethical individual” is traced throughout the narrative (92). Though I appreciate Ravela’s reading of *The Mad Man* as a kind of revised bildungsroman, the takeaway I gain most from his interpretation is that the novel puts pressure on the constraints of the liberal subject, making the argument that the book illustrates a reversal of classic liberalism by defining personhood as being possessed by others, rather than possessing oneself (110). This is a sentiment I carry with me in my own reading of the novel—for Ravela, like for myself, *The Mad Man* reimagines the roles of identity and subjectivity, and this reimagining is contingent on connection between subjects. In other words, it shows that contact relationality is necessary to make changes in the conception of self.

The archive of U.S. AIDS literature is full of texts about how gay men relate and connect to each other and how those relations affect their sense of self. For instance, Mark Doty’s *Heaven’s Coast* and Paul Monette’s *Borrowed Time*—two canonical AIDS memoirs—both share intimate accounts of their connection to the men they love and who ultimately die from AIDS complications. David Feinberg’s *Eighty-Sixed* tracks the quantity rather than the quality of the protagonist B.J.’s sexual connections. However, despite the archive being full of stories like these that tell of different kinds of relationships between people and the effects of those connections, there is a remarkable lack of stories about connections between different kinds of people. In other words, American AIDS stories and the characters in them, especially those

written during and coming out of the crisis's height, tend to be unimaginatively homogeneous when it comes to race, class, and gender.

Most mainstream AIDS narratives are about white middle-class men relating to other white middle-class men. This, of course, does not accurately reflect the diversity of people impacted by AIDS. However, the homogeneity in the archive does reflect something about how relationality is characterized in most of its books. Cordoning together characters with similar needs and who look similar and who come from similar backgrounds, implicitly endorses and normalizes a system of relationality that rejects cross-class and cross-race interactions. To put it another way, most AIDS stories illustrate the network model of relationality, not the contact model. Delany's *The Mad Man*—a truly essential piece of AIDS literature—goes against the archive's grain in this respect. Hence, the next section examines *The Mad Man* for the way it demonstrates characters who connect with each other and the world around them via contact relationality.

The Illustration—Looking at Transgression

In *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, Delany articulates the benefits of his contact model: "Given the mode of capitalism under which we live, life is at its most rewarding, productive, and pleasant when large numbers of people understand, appreciate, and seek out interclass contact and communication conducted in a mode of good will" (121). In *The Mad Man*, Delany illustrates these benefits—he creates characters who gain emotionally and sexually from intermingling in meaningful ways with others who have different sexual desires and are

from different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds. He does so mostly by way of John and the sexual encounters he observes and has with a variety of men.

Through an intimate first person point-of-view, John describes his experiences of contact relationality in a variety of spaces: in gay clubs—"Blinking up at us, Dave nodded. His mouth was open. Some of mine [piss], then some of Phel's, got into it. When it did, Dave swallowed. But he wasn't into drinking it all, the way I'd been. He rubbed it over his chest, over his face, down his belly" (140)—, in porn theaters—"In their late thirties to early seventies, eighteen or nineteen men stood around under the skylight… A couple of blowjobs were going on in the corners. A couple of guys were watching and masturbating… I've seen enough guys, white, black, and yes, Asian, pitching and catching" (167)—, and in public parks—"He rolled a little to the side and slid his cock into my mouth again along with his scummy fingers; after I'd sucked them clean, his hands came up to cage my head and he started humping my face…ten minutes later [he] grunted out *another* load!… [Then] I turned, stepped off the cardboard's frayed edge" (276-8). These three scenes—the club, the porn theater, the park—are common ones in *The Mad Man*; they are accurate representations of the kinds of personal connections John makes, where he makes them, and with whom he shares them. What is common in these scenes is that they each show contact modes of relationality—they illustrate connections that mingle folks from different races, classes, and sexual orientations. They also share something else: these scenes notably illustrate examples of erotic transgressions, or violations of what mainstream culture says sex or sexual desire should be or look like.

It is also significant that these erotic transgressions are animated by race. Via this animation, the novel puts a picture to how race and sexuality—queer sexuality in particular—are inexorably and intimately connected, which serves to highlight not only subject-to-subject

relations but also subject-to-body and subject-to-ideology relations. In other words, *The Mad Man* shows how people relate to each other *and* how they relate to their own racialized and sexualized bodies and imagined belief systems. This is an important illustration because it tells something striking about contact relationality: bodies and pleasures are central to this brand of relationality, and bodies and pleasure, furthermore, are always imbricated with race.

Given these connections, I am drawn to Darieck Scott's criticism of *The Mad Man* in *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*, because of how he develops an understanding of "the relation between blackness and abjection" and the "body-psyche nexus wherein the relation between blackness and abjection is experientially lived" (204). Scott takes up *The Mad Man* to explicate the connection between blackness and abjection. He argues that:

> Delany's protagonist [John] navigates the position of sexual/ racial 'bottom' as a complex, empowered political persona and potentially demonstrates how a history of sexual domination endows the figure of blackness with nimble abilities, with a form of power. John uses his [sexual] activities and fantasies and their historical resonance of racial subjugation, and the intense pleasure these acts give him largely *because* of that resonance, to open the way to a sense that he operates within a greater sphere of freedom and power than he did before engaging in his sexual practices. (206)

For Scott, then, John shows, perhaps counterintuitively, how racially charged sexual encounters—ones that bottom the Black subject specifically—that on the surface would seem to demean him as a Black man actually serve to give him physical and psychic pleasure, and, notably, Scott's broader implication is that the Black figure also gains power and liberation. I

want to put his insights into the context of contact relationality because of the way they highlight the potential power of eroticized transgressions. More directly, *The Mad Man* demonstrates how eroticized transgressions—racialized ones, more precisely—can open a path toward contact relationality, and this kind of relationality motions away from identity as an institution that establishes, upholds, and legitimizes racist social practices.

In order to delve into the erotic racialized transgressions in *The Mad Man*, I next explore the path toward contact relationality further by focusing in on a particular relationship in the novel. Its last third tells a love story between John and Leaky, a white homeless man John meets on a park bench near his apartment. Right from the get go, Leaky lays out his kinks: "Man, I need to piss on a nigger so bad I could just about cry" (337). Something I want to bring attention to about this relatively short declarative sentence is the verbs "to piss" and "cry." These words represent that of the body; they come from the body or are done by the body. Notice, too, that these bodily responses of Leaky's receive his actions; in this case, they receive his needs and abilities—he *needs* to piss and *could* cry. These needs and abilities are what he requires and wants to do; they are his desires. The diction choices in the sentence, then, demonstrate a direct relationship between body and desire. That relationship may not be especially surprising, but it signals to something important—this body/ desire correlation also shows that that relationship is tied to race by way of the prepositional phrase—"on a" n-word—which links the clauses that establish the body/ desire connection. Because the n-word is the word used in the prepositional phrase—rather than, say, black guy—there is a particular charge to the sentence and to the relationships it is constructing.

Most typically, especially when said by a white person, this word is used as a racial slur meaning to do psychological violence. In this case, though Leaky is using it as a racial slur, his

intentions are not violent, rather they are affectionately sexual—he's cruising John. As the plot unfolds, the reader learns that Leaky desires John as a Black man not because he wants to degrade him but because he wants to honor him; in other words, his desires are most certainly racially motivated, but they are not vicious. Nonetheless, his desire is transgressive as it violates a normative social-sexual norm: people shouldn't piss on each other to get off and people shouldn't get off on race. And so though Leaky's short declarative statement—"Man, I need to piss on a …"—tells most directly that he's into water sports with Black men, it also tells something about the inner workings of contact relationality: race is an interlocutor, facilitating in the communication between desire and body. Leaky and John connect, at least in part, because of their racial difference.

Furthermore, eroticized transgressions can be a path toward this kind of relationality—in other words, these transgressions open opportunity for John and Leaky to be exposed to each other not in spite of but because of their differences. These men are achieving contact relationality and doing so via racialized erotic transgressions. Race is a central ingredient. Race being at least an impetus for their encounter complicates my claim that contact relationality can be a way to look beyond identity. To parse out this complication, I want to return to for a moment what identity is and how it functions. Identities, or social categories, rely on membership and recognizing oneself in the other members. For this reason, identity relies on and procreates sameness. In its definition the OED underscores the element of sameness in identity: "The quality or condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature, properties, or in particular qualities under consideration; absolute or essential sameness; oneness." The sameness aspect of identity is the primary issue with identity and identitarian based politics: identity serves to group like together with like, and this grouping leaves little room for relating to people who

are different from each other or even be exposed to each other in a meaningful way. This is why I call for a loosening of the role of identity by way of opening up space for additional modes of self-authorship and subject formation.

Bersani helps define the pitfalls of identity by explaining that, "It seems that the only way we can love the other or the external world is to find ourselves somehow in it. Only then might there be a nonviolent relation to the world that doesn't seek to exterminate difference" ("Gay Betrayals" 43). As illustrated, then, in the scene with them meeting at the bench, the relationship Leaky and John share begins from their differences, as they do not see themselves in the other. What I understand going on with Leaky and his desire for John is that he specifically does not recognize himself in John and that is why he desires connection with him. There is an erotics of difference at play. And so, race is not in this case functioning as an identity so much as facilitator for desire. Leaky is divesting from identity by not putting stock in sameness; as a result, Leaky and John invest in difference via their erotic transgressions. Consequently, the park bench scene illustrates how contact relationality can be an anti-identitarian tool.

Like Leaky's kinks, John's also support a telling interpretation of erotic transgressions energized by race. One of the sex-escapades that stands out in the text describes John's time at "the Real Men's Room," a gay bar with particular nights themed "Wet Night." On these nights the bar specializes as a haven for gay men into water sports, erotic play with urine as the focal point—such acts include pissing on others, being pissed on, and imbibing piss. John frequents the club on Wet Night to practice this particular kink. On one night John brings along with him Dave, a white man he met and fucked in a sex theater, and the two of them join Pheldon (Phel), John's closest friend. The three men are quick to take part in the bar's customs:

> I [John] came on Phel and Dave, getting it on together. As I stopped to watch, Phel bent Dave's head back, deep kissing him… Now he began to push Dave down, as though he wanted him to go down on his dick. 'Shit,' Phel said, breathing hard and hoarsely. 'I think I'm gonna piss on this honky motherfucker! That'd really make me feel good.' He turned back and beckoned to me. 'Hey, bro'—come on over here, and piss in this white motherfucker's face with me.' " (140)

Similar to the earlier episode with Leaky and John, this one pictures erotic transgressions centered around bodily fluids and racial difference, signaled by the phases "piss on this honky" and "piss in this white motherfucker's face with me." Again, then, the link between race, desire, and body is drawn. There are, however, notable distinctions between this scene and the one described previously with Leaky. For instance, here at Wet Night a group sharing component is present. Phel calls on John to share Dave with him, and when doing so a closeness is flagged by way of dialogue like "Hey, bro" and "with me." The sexual transgressions, then, make easier an act of collective bonding. This communal bonding element is underscored further when another Black man joins the threesome: "It was the tall, two-hundred-fifty, two-hundred-eighty-pound black guy with the glasses, whom I'd last seen, last month, urinating in the white guy's mouth" (140-1). Notice that when describing the new join, John remembers him from a previous night when similar practices were taking place—"urinating in the white guy's mouth"—which illustrates that there is precedence to the kinds of transgressions they are enjoying, and in both instances racial difference is serving as impetus for communal connecting in the narrative. Again, then, race is not only a component in the contact relationality happening here, but also a deciding factor.

When John recalls this experience at Wet Night, he notes: “The feeling it gave me was funny: suddenly I was overcome by a sense of just how happy the little white cocksucker was, with three black guys pissing all over him, with my black dick down his throat and two more prodding at his mouth. I felt myself start to cum” (141). His recollection conjures noteworthy imagery. The literal overlapping of cocks and of piss, of bodies and fluids, serves to emphasize another overlapping that’s happening: interactive cross-racial intimacy. The imagery, then, gives a visual imagining of the contact relationality that’s taking place. Furthermore, what strikes me about this passage of John’s impression is its progression. It begins broadly in what it tells—he feels “funny.” Feeling funny is vague; it can be interpreted in many ways. As the sentence progresses, however, funny feeling’s meaning becomes narrower, more precise. The result of this movement—from the nonspecific to the specific—is a kind of unraveling of the feelings. The affect unwinds: in the first clause, set off by a colon, John quite broadly states that it—the sexual encounter he’s experiences and witnesses—gave him a funny feeling. This vague sense of John’s becomes unraveled after the colon, serving here as a kind of grammatical equal sign. The unraveling comes in the form of another complete clause and two prepositional phrases—these sentence parts untwist John’s funny feeling by defining it more concisely: it is caused by him realizing how happy the sexual transgression is making Dave, and this sense of Dave’s happiness leads to a culmination, given in the next sentence—John starting to climax. As the structure of these sentences uncoil—the clauses stretching out, becoming longer in length—the men too loosen up with each other. The grammatical unwinding parallels the characters’ emotional unwinding, signaling to a lack of tension between the men. While tangled up in sexual arousal, erotic transgression, and racial variation, these men become undone together. This parallel, then, between structure and plot that I have pointed to gestures to how the connections between people

can become relaxed, not made tense, due to differences. Connection founded on difference is an exciting possibility.

To be clear, the significance I want to draw out here is not that gay sex—even racially transgressive gay sex—has the potential to make subjects more humane to each other, defeating racism in its path. That implication is, of course, overly romantic and reductively simplistic. What I do want to highlight, conversely, resides in the idea that racially charged queer erotic transgressions have the potential to make connections between subjects more inhuman. Given this line of thinking, then, contact relationality can lead to relationships that are less human—this is another powerful possibility. I'm inspired here, again, by José Esteban Muñoz. In his piece "The Sense of Brownness," Muñoz conveys the message that the category of human has its limitations, but that brownness and blackness and queerness have the potential to stretch beyond those constraints, and as a consequence these marginalized existences can touch what's within *and* beyond such boundaries. He explains that "Once one stops doing the incommensurate work of attempting to touch inhumanity, one loses traction and falls back onto the predictable coordinates of a relationality that announces itself as universal but is, in fact, only a substrata of the various potential interlays of life within which one is always inculcated" (209). Giving consideration to this sentence's structure and form, not simply its message, helps me grasp the importance of touching as part of how I build contact relationality as an alternative to identity.

The introductory clause in Muñoz's sentence sets up a circumstance: "Once one stops doing the incommensurate work of attempting to touch inhumanity." The "once" in particular serves up a conditional situation. However, the reader must look to a sentence a few lines earlier to best understand this circumstance—there Muñoz writes: "To think the inhuman is the necessary queer labor of the incommensurate." Looking at these two sentences together, I see

that when it comes to inhumanism both "to think" and "to touch" are at work; in other words, in order to grasp the inhuman both the cognitive and sensory processes must be functioning. I also want to note the repetition of "incommensurate" in both the sentence and the clause. This repetition combined with the denotative and connotative similarities between "work" in the clause and "labor" in the earlier sentence creates a parallel logic, leading the reader to the conclusion that to touch inhumanity is a kind of queer labor. To do queer labor is to touch the inhuman.

But I'm not quite done with the introductory clause. After the circumstance set up in that clause, it is, then, the "Once one stops" sentence's central clause that relays the fallout that occurs when queer labor ceases: "one loses traction and falls back." This is an earnest, direct clause. It's one that explains a sober result of non-movement. It's a threat. It portends what will happen if we don't get going now: we lose traction, we fall back. The cautionary consequence in the main clause—laden with sliding, tumbling imagery—is held up by what comes before and after it. The introductory clause gives energy words, words that describe industry and exercise, words like: doing, work, and touch. Considering its regular appearance in queer theory (thanks, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick!), touch stands out from this energetic group. This word choice makes the drive put forth by the clause more—well, sexy. If sex(y) stops, we fall back. Again a warning. Another word of caution.

Much also happens after the main clause's presence. A subordinating conjunction and a string of prepositional phrases breathlessly and continually spill outward and onward, affecting an impelling momentum. Something better be done, now. This thread also holds a collection of architectural words, words that speak of steadied, measured design and construction, works like: coordinates, substrata, interlays, and inculcated. These words stack together, collectively

assemble, which serves as a counterpoint to and tension against the threat of the sudden, uncalculated drop that came before them. Too quickly we can fall onto what's long established and expected. Slipping and falling out of the queer is an easy move to make. Dangerously easy. Contact is necessary. In order to avoid that regressive, assimilative fall backward we must keep touching and feeling. These sensory modes are essential parts of contact relationality.

Muñoz helps me understand, then, that both race and queerness are affective and experiential. They're felt, they're done. We caress ethnicity and queer, as they necessarily touch us. It's a back and forth. This idea that race and sexuality are affective experiences shifts away from the toxic, neoliberal, identitarian notion that each and every one of us must be able and willing to stand alone, distinct, and without aid from all others. Like the main clause in Muñoz's sentence, subjects too are held up, held together by each other. We too are suspended by what came before and what will come after us. We move around in the commons with each other, touching each other, holding each other up.

There is no doubt that Muñoz has helped race studies and queer theory move away from identity-driven notions of the subject and toward affect-driven conceptions of who we are and why we are. For instance, in "Cruising the Toilet: Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Radical Black Traditions and Queer Futurity," he explores the tension between the subject's relationship to identity and affect by reaching backward to explain the then present: "a kind of queer potentiality... existed before the stultifying effects of some identitarian narratives installed after the modern gay movement took hold" (356). Again, he gives a kind of warning here: don't fall for identitarian scripts. However, in classic Muñozian fashion, he takes the time to articulate the blur between lines: "I do not wish to simply posit 'identitarian' as always already bad. It is important to resist a knee-jerk denunciation of anything that might connote identity. Historically,

identity's effects are at times both and alternatively stultifying and generative" (366). His talent for both crystallizing and complicating identity and subjectivity is clear—a necessary though often forgotten impulse, I think.

Though maybe precariously, I think most feminisms are still in a place that center around identity politics, and as a result much of the work in feminist study builds on neoliberal interpretations of the subject as an idiosyncratic unit. Muñoz urges a move in directions that de-center such notions of the subject, and I think we can benefit from turning to those urgings, like the one he gives in the sentence "Once one stops" sentence. For me this sentence helps to de-center the subject. It's promising though stern message about how the subject can spill out of the limitation of the human via the reach of race and sexuality. The way the sentence delivers a nested caution warning us not to fall back and the way the sentence layers prepositions which act to pluralize and nuance relationality, exposing it as, yes, sometimes hazardous but also as full of imbricated prospects.

Muñoz is not damning relationality. Instead, he's making a case for the nuances of this complex phenomenon. There are many relationalities and some of them, as Muñoz tells us, have greatly generative potential. If we touch inhumanity through our queer work, then we can keep and even gain traction leading us to other layers of relationality, ones that are not so predictable. Touching and contact are means toward alternative kinds of relationality, relationalities that are bound in differences that are affective and experiential. With these potential relationalities a subject's difference—being queer and brown, for instance — is felt and done, which means it's also malleable. Though this kind of relationality does not negate the solidified power of the more ubiquitous relationality that is tethered to historical, colonial regimes and identitarian narratives, it does have its own power: the potential to destabilize the "interlays of life within which one is

always inculcated" (209). So, it is how and why we feel and touch ethnicity and queerness that can open different directions of being subjects and doing subjectivity. Toward those pathways is a direction I think feminist work should move.

The kind of work Muñoz describes and the kind of work his "Once one stops" sentence is doing are the kinds of work I see illustrated in Delany's piss play scene. It is a sensory kind of work. John, Phel, Dave, and the tall Black guy together are practicing forms of touching and contact that facilitate an alternative kind of relationality—contact relationality. This kind of connection helps to undo the subject from identity, as it is bound in differences, differences that are affective and experiential. John's relationship with Leaky and his sexual encounters with the men on Wet Night bring picture to how marginalization can be a productive source of erotic imagination. Furthermore, both Leaky's and John's kinks—their desires and how they are played out—illustrate how sexually erotic transgressions that rely on cross-race connections facilitate contact relationality: a way of connecting with people that relies and thrives on interactions of difference. In other words, contact relationality makes it so the subject is defined by connections, affects, and experiences that instead of being rooted in memberships of likeness are rather grounded in erotics of difference.

The Wrap Up—Coming Together

As I conclude, I want to reach back around to John and Leaky's connection, because not only does it center the novel but their connection also typifies the benefits of contact relationality. During a pillow talk session, Leaky tells John: "I was born there [the South]… But, you know, I can't take the way they treat black people… You'd think with me, gettin' off on

black guys what get off on bein' called 'nigger' and stuff, that wouldn't make somebody like me blink an eye. But I really can't take it. It fucking turns my stomach… So now I guess you really think I'm strange." John responds to Leaky, telling him, "It makes sense to me that, if you like some group sexually, and want them to be around and happy and fuck with you a lot, you might be concerned with how they're treated socially—and politically" (367-8). The dialogue exchanged here lays bare the practical significance of racialized sexual transgressions: cross-race erotics can be a way for people who come from different worlds to treat each other better, without needing to rely on recognition. Contact relationality, then, may not be a way to live someone else's experiences, but it can be a way to care about them.

To return for a moment to Scott's criticism of *The Mad Man*: I agree with his reading that racially charged sexual experiences can be a mode to power and liberation for Black subjects; however, I want to add to this idea by noting that *The Mad Man* also demonstrates that an important part of the power nested in radically transgressive erotics is in the way it can engender compassion between participants. The institution of racism is built around indifference and cruelty, and thus engendering compassion between people is a way to de-weaponize that institution, and a subject who takes part in this de-weaponizing is consequently less institutionalized by racism. In the context of the novel, the relationship and racially charged transgressive sex John and Leaky share in allows John, as a Black man, to make a personal connection with someone he comes to revere quite a lot, to take power in his own subjectivity, and to evacuate some of the power held by racism. All of these advantages are possible for him because of contact relationality.

Race, of course, is intersectionally webbed not only with sexuality but with socioeconomic- and intellectual-class as well, and, again, John and Leaky's relationship

illustrates how being a marginalized subject can be a source of erotic transgression and contact relationality:

> He [Leaky] said: "When I was in school, in the second grade, they said I was a slow learner—borderline retard. Even niggers can call me dumb." He looked pleased, even proud. "Yeah?" I smiled. "You must be pretty dumb, then." On his bearded face, the smile came on again like a streetlight. "Yeah!" From the movement of his sweatshirt's shoulder, I could tell his hand was working back between his legs. (341)

As already established, during the men's first encounter Leaky's kink of Black men pissing on him becomes apparent. As this passage shows, however, racially charged kinks are not the only kind of degradation that gets him off: Leaky also enjoys being called dumb—it makes him light up and get hard. Given that Leaky is homeless and not formally educated and John is a middle-class Ph.D. candidate in philosophy, this kink serves to eroticize Leaky's poorer intellectual status and social class.

Still fooling around on the bench, John tells Leaky: "You're probably the stupidest whitey running around homeless in this fucking neighborhood" (341). The OED notes "whitey" as a colloquial term, a chiefly derogatory one. John, however, calls Leaky whitey in an endearing way, subverting the power of this racially charged language—this is a similar rhetorical move Leaky makes when calling John "nigger." John's dirty talk pairs "whitey" with "homeless"—the proximity blurs together the subversion that's going on. This scene, then, that Delany creates both valorizes and eroticizes race and class differences, and these erotic transgressions bring together John and Leaky, opening a path to contact relationality for them. In this way, I think John and Leaky show light on a new way to interpret race and class.

In fact, *The Mad Man* gives readers new ways to read—read literature, eroticism, and race. In his essay "Bad Reading: The Affective Relations of Queer Experimental Literature after AIDS," Tyler Bradway theorizes what he refers to as "bad reading," defining it as, "affective relations that contest the corporeal norms that fuse readers into the heteronormative public sphere" (190-1). This mode of interpretation rejects renovating queer literature in ways that has too often been done post AIDS crisis—bad reading, in other words, refuses to hermeneutically clean up texts and readings of them. For Bradway, experimental queer literature, like Delany's *The Mad Man*, serves to disrupt heteronormative, "established reading protocols" (190). In part, then, he argues that queer experimental literature is an impetus for bad reading and other atypical methods of interpretation. This kind of reading is beneficial, insofar as it makes way for a "queer politics of reading" that allows the reader more social agency. In making this claim, Bradway reads *The Mad Man* as a "hermeneutic of eroticism." I am extremely drawn to this descriptive phrasing of his—hermeneutic of eroticism—because of the way it so precisely and so effectively explains a principal success of Delany's novel: it interprets sexual desire, and importantly it does so in the context of the AIDS epidemic. In my reading of *The Mad Man*, the analysis of racially charged erotic transgressions is a crucial element of the hermeneutic it provides. I agree that: "*The Mad Man* invites readers to encounter the incipiently social relations of queer eroticism" (193), and I am glad to run with Bradway's ball by adding that I think an absolutely necessary part of this invitation the novel makes is its representation of transgressive sex that is imbued with race. For me this is an essential part because this kind of sex illustrates contact relationality as an alternative mode of people connecting. In this way, *The Mad Man* delivers to the reader new ways to read, but also new ways to connect to others. To put in another way, one of the largest stakes for Bradway is that Delany's novel—like AIDS as a historical event—reminds or

teaches us how to read queerly (208)—agreed, and I think the text doubles down by reminding or teaching us how to connect queerly, too.

The relationships illustrated in *The Mad Man* demonstrate that desire based on erotic transgressions grows contact relationality. Because contact relationality has worthwhile ontological and epistemological implications, I want to be explicit as to why the growing of this kind of connection making matters. Contact relationality is consequential because it is a means to gain knowledge and make purchase on subjectivity that is not based on inclusion or exclusion but rather on connection—connection that does not rely on identification or recognition. In other words, the subject—via contact relationality—experiences a sense of self by connecting with others, rather than by being included into or excluded from a group or identity. Membership is not necessary for this subjectivity. Contact relationality, then, is a step toward allowing the subject to gain subjectivity without the purchase of identity.

The work Paul John Eakin does in *How Our Lives Become Our Stories: Making Selves* has been a great influence to my thinking about the relationship between relationality and identity and about the potential implications of contact relationality. In his book, Eakin looks at narratives in literature, especially texts that are collaborative in nature, to "highlight the relational dimension that is fundamental to all human experience of identity" (57), making autonomy a myth: "we are conditioned precisely not to recognize the relational dimension of selfhood," and, furthermore, what happens between people—relationality—makes us what we are (63). He clearly lays it out that people are relational and that even identity is relational rather than autonomous and that the relational dimension of identity experience is indeed fundamental (61). Eakin claims, and as I agree, that we should shift our conception of self (i.e., subjectivity) by thinking of ourselves as relational. I also align with Eakin that subjects are not self-

determined, rather we are determined by others, we are relationally determined. We do not create ourselves; we are by created by the relations we have with other people, histories, spaces, and communities.

I have forwarded that contact relationality is a way to imagine a subjectivity and revision subject formation—it offers a viable mode of self-authorship that moves beyond identity. Though identity is also a valid way to define ourselves, it is not the only way. Delany's *The Mad Man* illustrates another possibility: a sense of self that is relational. Having a relationally-driven subjectivity can facilitate people having a greater sense of social and communal responsibility—which most certainly needs to be a central aim for queer feminist work.

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CHAPTER 3:

MUDDYING GENRES OF BEING: THE POWER OF BEARING WITNESS IN JAN ZITA GROVER'S *NORTH ENOUGH*

"If a burden constitutes a load, a duty, a responsibility, and especially one that is oppressive or worrisome, even one that threatens to become parasitical and to impinge upon the self's integrity, it refers also (in an older, technical sense of the term) to the capacity *for carrying that burden."*
—Sarah Brophy, *Witnessing AIDS: Writing, Testimony, and the Work of Mourning*

The Lay of the Land—Knowing, Being, & Witnessing

In this chapter, I forward that the act of witnessing—to bear witness to (a fact or statement); to testify to, attest; to furnish oral or written evidence of (OED)—is a means to purchase subject position and actualize subjectivity. My argument illustrates that bearing witness is a central element to beingness and knowing; furthermore, it is one that allows subjects to understand themselves and their worldview outside of culturally dominant, heteropatriarchal, white supremacist modes. I support and unpack my claims via my interpretations of Jan Zita Grover's memoir *North Enough: AIDS and Other Clear-Cuts*—my readings illustrate how the text invests in modes of knowledge acquisition and ways of being that move outside the limitations of heteropatriarchal visions of what we know, how we know it, and who deserves to know. Furthermore, I bring together feminist, critical race, and decolonial theories to complicate and flesh out my arguments. Within this context, this chapter close reads moments in Grover's book that shed light on the power of bearing witness. I discover in these close readings of witnessing that the distinction between what does and does not constitute existence becomes blurry, which, in the end, supports my call for the reevaluation and even a restructuring of genres of being. In doing so, I lay stress on the collapse of the distinction between the subject and the

object and critique the assumption that being an object is inherently negative, asking my readers to reassess the process of objectification and what it means to be a subject and how the subject is formed.

I see witnessing as a necessary component in the subject experience, so much so that I wonder if the subject is even able to have a fully actualized subjectivity without the experience of bearing witness. Moreover, what exactly is the relationship between bearing witness and subjectivity? Can witnessing be a way for the subject to have more agency in the creation of her own experiential narrative? Is observation a passive or active activity? What does witnessing have to do with the subject's experience of itself and its world? As I examine these inquires, I find that one thing is for sure: bearing witness holds a great deal of power—it's that strength of potential, its connection to subjectivity, and its link to how we understand and are beings in the world that I want to better understand. I want to note here that during my discussion of witnessing's role in subjectivity, there is some slippage between the key terms "subject," "subjectivity," and "subject position." The slippage is not accidental. These key terms—these words and concepts and all that they are signified by—stand to represent ideas and experiences that though merit individual distinction, also blur into, overlap, and inform each other. The occasional transposing of certain key terms in my writing happens because being and experience, the physical person and what the person encounters, are very much integrated—maybe so much so that, in fact, the very distinction between subject and object weakens.

Through the act of witnessing Grover's memoir challenges the way we know and are. In other words, I read the text as illustrating how witnessing can be an innovative access point to how subjects gain knowledge and experience subjectivity. This idea centers my claim that witnessing is a necessary element in actualizing a meaningful subjectivity. In this chapter, then, I

put a spotlight on how witnessing informs and affects subject experience and formation. Thus, it is through the lens of witnessing that my readings of *North Enough* work through the ideas of what it means to know and what it means to be. In doing so, I find that Grover's memoir holds great untapped potential to destabilize and blur ways of knowing and categories of being, by calling into question assumptions about how human beings connect to other human beings. I take on this line of questioning in order to examine how in contemporary western culture some connections and relations are considered legitimate and valuable—human to human connections, for example—whereas other connections—human and non-human, for instance—are delegitimized.

These inquiries set the groundwork for one of my sub-claims: the blurring of the subject and object can be an advantageous endeavor because it offers an alternative to identity as the driving force in subjectivity. As the subject/ object distinction breaks down, an opportunity to rethink how the subject is constructed opens. My glossing of *North Enough* imagines witnessing—one of its central themes—as a mode to urge this kind of rethinking. I put pressure on identity as the central determiner in what the subject knows and how the subject experiences their worlds. My stakes in applying this pressure are to spend time sitting with some of the falsehoods repeatedly narrated in western society about not only what beingness is but also about which beings and which identities are inferior and which are superior—the kinds of lies that work to make it "true" that people of color are inferior, that women are inferior, that queer folks are inferior. In other words, the reason I call for a re-conceptualizing of identity is because the advantages of socially constructed identity markers, advantages such as in-group camaraderie, are outweighed by the disadvantages, such as an "us versus them" mentality. The stakes I have outlined here all begin with witnessing. Essentially, I want to think about who we are as a

subject, as people, as individuals in ways outside of the sphere of identity. Identity has its advantages, yes, but it is not the only, and maybe not even the best, way to determine who we are and how we want to present ourselves in or connect to our worlds. Witnessing is the alternative I see outlined in *North Enough*.

In order to both unpack and complicate my claim that witnessing opens a novel way to know and be, I will next provide some context of the memoir and the ways in which it engages with the theme of witnessing. Then I turn to feminist theorist and philosopher Kelly Oliver to help ground the connection between the subject's sense of self and witnessing. I also perform several close readings of *North Enough* in order to further dig into my own insights, while sewing in other theoretical voices for texture and support. I conclude with the discovery this journey through witnessing has brought me to, a finding that focuses on the formation of the subject.

Digging In—Witnessing in *North Enough* & Beyond

In *North Enough*, Grover writes of her own firsthand experiences bearing witness during the AIDS crisis. The memoir begins with her relaying her experiences living in San Francisco working to provide care to people living with AIDS; the text quickly transitions to her cross-county move to Minnesota—a change of place intended as a kind of escape from the crisis, though she soon realizes it stays with her. Witnessing is a practical part of how she makes sense of the world she is living in—the new world of the AIDS epidemic—and bearing witness is a concrete way for her to understand herself and how she fits into that world and the places she inhabits. Witnessing is a practice for Grover, and it's an important one because it is a means of

claiming agency in subjectivity. The text demonstrates, then, how witnessing can be understood as an act of resistance. I read the witnessing taking place in *North Enough* as an act of resistance to the constraints of constructs tethered to identity, and, thus, it is also an act of opposition against the potential oppressive consequences of identity.

Grover's memoir takes up the ways in which knowledge is gained and transmitted. For her, knowledge acquisition is intimately connected to place and to witnessing what happens in those places; additionally, her acts of witnessing allow her to "become" who she is, making her project one also invested in ways of being and becoming. Grover's project, furthermore, illustrates how being in a place and being a witness there is also a kind of political act of resistance. She shows how this act is one that takes time, requires learning the history of a place, and sharing its stories. She ties together subjectivity, memory, history, and narrative to powerful ends:

> I have learned the history of my new home [northern Minnesota] by reading its archives, I must willingly suspend my disbelief in their biases and partial truths and assume instead their direct links to the living reality of my new home… the profound and historically supple knowledge of a place that permits us to become functioning parts of our civic and biological communities can only be gained by *being there*… we shall find, to our rue, that some kinds of knowledge cannot be fast-forwarded, cannot be skipped. I believe that I can *become* a native of the north woods as surely as I *was* a native of California in the 1940s-1980s. I give myself whole-heartedly to whatever experience, whatever identity that will be. (163)

I want to bring attention to the appositive in the last sentence: "whatever experience, whatever identity." By setting experience and identity side-by-side via the use of the grammatical appositive, Grover imparts to the reader that "identity" further explains "experience," and vice versa; in other words, to experience is to have identity and identity derives from experience. The two are necessarily linked. By grammatically and definitionally connecting the two, the idea that identity is inherently devoid of experience gets deflated, and the power of experience as part of the subject's personhood gets amplified. This appositive serves to bolster my claim that personhood and subjectivity are contingent upon life experience, including what we witness as part of that experiencing. Identity should be understood as less about social categories that facilitate sameness and instead should be understood more in terms of personal lived experience—this latter understanding calls notice to the value of individual differences and the pliability of identity. In this sense, I call for a divestment from a particular understanding and function of identity, rather than discarding it all together.

The idea that personhood is intimately contingent upon experience is further supported by looking at the passage's subject matter together with its italicized words. The content tells the reader that to know and understand a place takes a lot more than simply reading about and researching it; it requires living and being part of that place. That is the only way to know its past, present, and community. More so, that is a way to "*become* a native." This coming to be, this having of identity, occurs with experiencing a place. Grover also italicizes *being*, the present participle of "to be," and *was*, in this case the first-person past tense of "to be." Emphasizing these "be" verbs via italicization and shifting in tense works to illustrate that "to be"—that is to occupy a position, to exist—is a process that changes over time, and it is one that is connected to place and experience. To put it another way, place and experience are essential parts of *being* a

subject—in this case, Grover is writing about the part of her subjecthood that is native, as in being local, not being indigenous.

It is certainly worth noting here that her use of "native" can be read as problematic, especially given her positionality as a white woman who is not even originally from Minnesota, the place she is referring to in the passage. However, I do not think she is attempting to claim an identity that is not hers to claim. Rather, she is making the claim that a community of people and the history of a place cannot be understood without being part of that community and actually living in that place: "Eventually I shall have a past as long as many born Minnesotans; at that point, I, too, shall recognize my nativeness as tied to a particular era as to particular places. But not yet; it is too soon" (163). Grover is making the point, then, that once one has lived in and witnessed a place long enough and experienced its communities, then that place and those peoples become part of ones' subjecthood, and for Grover, this is a process that requires witnessing, should be respected, and takes much time.

Kelly Oliver forges her own approach as she takes up the intersection of the subject's sense of self, witnessing, time, and history. Both her essay "Witnessing Subjectivity" and her book *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* are useful texts to consider here—they give a solid theoretical background to how witnessing and subjectivity are fastened together, while at the same time making way for Oliver to pave her own path. First, she foregrounds the importance of the Holocaust to conversations about witnessing and testimony by introducing how an unnamed female Auschwitz survivor has been considered by some historians and psychoanalysts to be an unreliable witness because her testimony did not match with "historical truth." ("Witnessing" 180/ *Witnessing* 1). Beginning this way is an effective move: first, it underscores how the Holocaust has been central to how theorists, philosophers, and historians understand and deploy

the idea of witnessing; and second, it highlights a few pivotal questions—what is the relationship between testimony and bearing witness? What is the goal of witnessing? To truth tell? To truth create? Simply to report?

Oliver then goes on to contextualize the theoretical background conversation by making it clear that, "Contemporary theory is still dominated by conceptions of identity and subjectivity that inherit a Hegelian notion of recognition. In various ways these theories describe how we recognize ourselves from our likeness as the same or in opposition to what is (or those who are) different from ourselves" (*Witnessing* 4). Oliver moves on to key poststructuralist theories on subjectivity, explaining that for theorists like Jacques Derrida, Charles Taylor, Axel Honneth, and Judith Butler, subjectivity is rooted primarily in the "recognition that comes through dialogue or discourse" (5). Eventually, however, Oliver distinguishes her ideas from these poststructural theorists' by explaining that though she does not entirely dispute the significance they give to the role of recognition, she does charge them with assigning too much worth on antagonism. In so doing, she stakes her claim:

> By insisting that subjectivity is based on antagonism, these theorists undermine the deep sense of response-ability implied in claiming that subjectivity is dialogic. While subjectivity is necessarily intersubjective and dialogic, it is not necessarily antagonistic. The tension at the heart of subjectivity need not produce antagonism between people. More than this, I will argue that we cannot conceive of subjectivity as both fundamentally antagonistic and fundamentally dialogic in the rich sense of dialogue and response-ability that I propose, using the notion of witnessing. ("Witnessing" 184/ *Witnessing* 5)

Oliver's claim helps me discern that the power of witnessing lies not only in telling untold stories but also in how it facilitates agency in subjectivity. Furthermore, her writings help distinguish between different meanings of witnessing: "The double meaning of witnessing—*eyewitness* testimony based on first-hand knowledge, on the one hand, and *bearing witness* to something beyond recognition that can't be seen, on the other—is the heart of subjectivity" (*Witnessing* 16). I see both types of witnessing happening in *North Enough*. Grover gives eyewitness testimony in her memoir by recording her observations of and experiences during the AIDS crisis and additionally with the environment she encounters in Minnesota. She also bears witness to the effects the epidemic has on individuals and communities: "I am only a writer who lived inside the epidemic, San Francisco's Castro District, and the homes of people living with AIDS in the mid to late 1980's, a time when ignorance and fear of the syndrome were in far greater supply than they are today. I want to record what I saw and experienced. I want to bear witness" (*North Enough* 7). Bearing witness is central in Grover's memoir and to her life experiences. Oliver's work helps me interpret the role bearing witness takes in the memoir because it grounds my understanding of what witnessing is and encourages me to consider the potentialities of witnessing and its tie to what we as subjects know and how we know it.

Though Oliver's definition of bearing witness and the way she connects it to subjectivity nuances my readings of *North Enough*, there are a couple reasons why I part from Oliver's thinking. The first reason relates to the way she discerns objectification as dehumanizing. This, of course, is not a surprising nor a novel perception, given, for instance, the history of enslaving humans—an institution that treats humans as property, as animals, and as objects, thus taking away their humanity. Oliver argues that "To see other people as objects or *the other* denies them the sovereignty and agency of subjectivity. To see other people as objects or *the other* is to

imagine them as unable to govern themselves as subjects" ("Witnessing" 182). Prior to reading *North Enough*, it would not have even crossed my mind to contend with Oliver's claim, ostensibly it seems a pretty acceptable and even factual assertion. However, my reading of Grover's memoir complicates the presumptive values of subject and object. In my reading of *North Enough* the line between subject and object becomes blurred and even conflated, and, as I argue, this conflation troubles definitions of genres of being, which I see as a productive move in the revisioning of identity.

I see this kind of blurring happening in *North Enough* in various ways. One move Grover uses that I find particularly effective is using both anthropomorphism and chremamorphism. For instance, a place object is treated as human when Grover compares it to the human body, specifically one being ravaged by AIDS; when describing the clear-cut land, she explains: "It is like looking at a festering lesion and noting the beauty of its smooth margins or marveling that cells divide and defend the crumbling body they also destroy" (*North Enough* 98). On the flip side, she uses chremamorphism earlier in the text when she describes Perry—a close friend of hers and her first friend to die from AIDS-related complications. She relays her account of Perry when he was ill from the disease by comparing him to an object: "He curled up conchlike into himself" (16). This doubling down move of using both literary devices not only adds more emphasis to the blurring of person and place, subject and object, it also dodges what could be interpreted as a hierarchical structuring. In other words, things and places are not "lifted up" to human status and humans are not "lowered down" to object status—instead the effect is that subject and object are given equal value, both are legitimized as the distinction between them becomes muddied.

The second reason I split some with Oliver is because she does not address interpellation in her essay and only in very brief passing in her book (173), which I find disconcerting considering its investment in the power of response in subject formation—a power that interpellation serves to define. For me, because interpellation is a central mechanism in the construction of the subject and works by way of the subject responding to as a call of authority, it is consequently an essential part of the conversation that theorizes the connection between recognition, response, and the subject. Interpellation is after all the process of becoming a subject by being called by a perceived figure of authority, turning toward that call, thus being recognized, and ultimately becoming a subject. In *North Enough*, whilst making sure not to romanticize it, the environment, the landscape, and its inhabitants are all a kind of authority figure for Grover. She is hailed by "nature" and she as a subject becomes intertwined with and contingent upon it—this, again, is illustrated via the subject/ object (place) blurring. For instance, she compares place to body: "I want a place I can explore slowly, slowly, like a lover's body, like a body I will tend—what, after all, has become more familiar?—but that will last longer than any body" (*North Enough* 13). The relationship she has with the non-human and the personification of it further muddies the line between subject and object and underscores a recognition/ response move.

Though I do not agree with all of Oliver's thinking, we do overlap in our insights regarding identity. I concur with Oliver that, "since vision connects us to the world and other people, then we can imagine an alternative recognition and an alternative form of recognition, which give rise to an alternative conception of subjectivity *and* identity" (192, emphasis mine). I am fully onboard with alternative forms of subjectivity and identity. It makes me wonder: what if we untangle identity and subjectivity? Can subjectivity be experienced outside the strict

parameters of identity? Maybe a kind of revisioning of identity can facilitate this. Rewriting identity is essential because identity can be a pernicious means to gain personhood. The stakes are high. One way identity can be understood is as socially, culturally, spatially, and historically bound membership groupings that serve as markers of difference. Though identity can be a way for subjects to gain a sense of belonging by way of inclusion, conversely it can too easily be a marginalizing apparatus because of the way identity divides people into categories based on sameness. As a result, uniformity becomes a valued attribute, difference becomes an avoided one, and people who read as different from the dominant codes of being become disenfranchised. For me these harmful effects call for a rethinking of identity and its role in the subject's being and becoming. I think we need to invest in alternative methods to purchase subject position.

The connection I see in Grover's memoir between the experience of being a subject and that of bearing witness illustrates such alternatives. My analysis of *North Enough* advances the notion that as a way to experience subjectivity, the act of witnessing is an alternative from that of identity—the benefit is that such a subjectivity holds more agency; in other words, witnessing can be a means for a subject to take more control over the way they experience and influence their worlds. Being witness is not only a part of subjectivity, but it is also an important part of subject formation. I witness therefore I am. In lieu of becoming a subject by making purchase on identity, witnessing, then, can be a more advantageous way for the individual to be constituted as a subject.

Deeper Exploration—So What, about Witnessing?

I'd like to step back for a moment to flesh out some of the implications of the claims I have been making here. The classic Althusserian scene of subject formation is one where the individual is interpellated by the state and other dominant ideologies, and as a consequence of being hailed, the individual becomes a subject. In that scenario, ideology has the power—it does the calling, the individual reacts by turning, and is consequently a subject. This is a violent process in that the individual does not have a choice in being called. The interpellation takes place without consent. Identity ties into this scenario for me in a couple of ways. First there is a parallel between identity and becoming subject: like with subject formation, identity can often be foisted on a subject, which, again, speaks to a lack of consent and control on the subject's part. Secondly, identities play a key role here because they—as social categories—serve as interpellaters in a kind of roundabout way. Ideologies are the imagined relationships a subject has with its time, place, and culture. Identity categories—like gender, race, and political affiliation—help define and reinforce such imagined relationships. Because of this intimate relationship between identity and ideology, identities, like ideologies, work as interpellaters. As a hailing device, identity, then, too is imbued with doing violence to the subject, which is why my intervention calls for a reimagining of identity and even more importantly a pivoting toward witnessing.

I see at least two central benefits to how witnessing connects to the subject and its subjectivity. It offers an alternative to identity. It is also a means for the subject to gain more agency over its subjectivity. Valuing witnessing as a central player in how the subject experiences its world means that the subject has more control during that process, making the process a less violent one. By gaining subject position through bearing witness, the subject is not

passive, she is a capable, active agent in becoming a subject and in her resulting subjectivity. This process I have described turns the Althusserian scene on its head because the subject does not passively heed to the call of authority, instead the subject actively participates in its ongoing construction by being a first-hand witness.

Most of *North Enough* is a recounting of Grover's first-hand experience as a witness during the AIDS crisis and her time witnessing the north woods' environment in Minnesota. There are, however, a few other characters who bear witness over the course of the text. James is the most notable of these characters—he makes frequent appearances in the narration and, more importantly, sight, vision, and bearing witness are central to the way he is characterized. Just months before his death, he and his partner Stan visit Grover, who at this point in the memoir is living in a cabin in northern Minnesota. Because James is experiencing the effects of advanced AIDS, his physical mobility is limited. The three friends (along with Grover's daughter) spend a lot of time inside the cabin. Grover explains: "He [James] could not walk much, managed merely the shuffle of the edematous, edging forward slowly on his KS lesions. But seated in the picture window overlooking the bay, he sighted creatures—great blue herons, beaver at twilight, otters at play—that the rest of us could not see" (127). Over the course of these two sentences there is a shift from describing James's limited mobility to his remarkable sight, from restricted ability to keen ability. This shift is marked by the main clauses of both sentences: "He could not walk" and "He sighted creatures."

I want to underscore that his sharp capability is housed in his seeing something take place, in his ability to witness the creatures. The observing he is doing is a kind of bearing witness—his seeing the heron, the beaver, and the otters is evidence that they are there. It's not that James has better physical vision than the others in the room, it's that he is more able to

observe the creatures the others cannot view. He bears witness to the animals, whereas the others do not. The way James is set aside in a remarkable way, the way he is made distinct by way of his witnessing capabilities is compounded by the word "that" in the last clause of the second sentence. This "that" is working both as a restrictive subordinating conjunction and as a modifier functioning to differentiate one thing from another. In this case, then, the sentence tells the reader that it is *necessary* we know James has discernment and that the others do not; we must know his vision makes him distinguishable. James has ability in ways the others do not, he is able by way of being witness. In this way, his witnessing—"to be present as an observer at; to see with one's own eyes"—gives him agency—"the ability or capacity to act"—via the power of observation.

Just a few pages later, this scene that describes James having remarkable vision is juxtaposed with one where his vision begins to decrease because of the effects of AIDS. In this scene he is back in San Francisco:

> He could not see, he could not see. His car bruised something else, and the rearview mirror splintered into a thousand silver tears. Weeping and frustrated, he managed to find the rental tower again and get back to the seventh floor. He left the car on the street. Something had finished for him, ended there in the concrete-block stacks rather than on his green hill. 'I want to go into hospice,' he had said. (136)

Like with the previous passage when James sat in a picture window, he is defined in this section by sight, but here it is his inability to see that shapes his experience. The repetition of "He could not see" that begins the quote doubles down on the importance of his lack. The diction continues to bring attention to his eyes and vision with words like "mirror," "tears," and "weeping." The passage culminates with dialogue, with James's words, "I want to go into hospice." The dialogue

is striking first because dialogue is so seldomly used in *North Enough*, its very usage is remarkable. Using James's own words at this moment underscores the element of testimony that is often part of witnessing. Grover cannot speak for James here; he must give his own testimony. His spoken statement signals to a significant change: though his vision is not literally gone, at least not yet, James can no longer figuratively see, and as a consequence he can no longer bear witness. This shift from being able to witness to not being able to finishes with him testifying that he wants "to go into hospice"—considering that hospice is where people go to die, a place where subjectivity ceases, then this testimony metaphorically gestures to the end of his subjectivity. Without witnessing James lacks a sense of himself as a subject. This passage, again, then, draws a correlation between being a subject and the ability to witness, losing the ability to witness leads to the loss of subjectivity and the ability to experience life in substantial meaningful ways. He loses subjectivity by way of not being able to witness.

Developing Places—Repositioning Knowing & Being

As I mention above, most of *North Enough* tracks Grover's own witnessings. It takes place during a transitional time in her life. She goes from being an AIDS worker in San Francisco during the height of the crisis to being a writer in Minnesota. She explains that:

> I did not move to Minnesota for the north woods. I had only the vaguest idea of what the term meant when I first saw them in early spring, the birch, aspen, and tamarack skinned of their needles and leaves. I thought they looked diseased. But in those days I saw disease everywhere. I moved there to try to leave behind—or at least, at a remoter distance—the plague that had consumed my life

> for the past six years. San Francisco, where I was born and had spent the past five years in the AIDS wars, was no longer a town I wanted to inhabit—nor, for that matter, was present-day California a state, metaphoric or geographic, that I could love." (3)

By pairing together the recurring use of "I" with the verbs "saw"/ "looked" and "thought" in this passage, Grover draws a relationship between vision and knowledge, between seeing and thinking. The passage's diction illustrates a striking, more obvious relationship, one between time and place by way of word choices like "early," "days," "past," "years," "present-day," and "distance," "where," "inhabit," "geographic." These relationships between sight/ knowledge and time/ place—the first may be less obvious than the second—do not simply serve to introduce Grover's memoir, they continue to run throughout it as a narrative bedrock. The frequent signaling to these relationships works to support one of the book's central insights: in order to know a place, a group of people, and a community's history, a person must come in contact with and see that place and the groups of people there—bearing witness, in other words, is a necessary ingredient to knowing, making *North Enough* a text that is invested in the ways in which knowledge is gained and shared; in other words, it is a project that has epistemological elements that a see as productive to consider in the context of how witnessing affects the ways subjects gain and share knowledge.

Given its insight regarding knowledge, *North Enough* is at its core very much a project that develops better understands of how knowledge is gained, and it ultimately claims that physical presence and witnessing are necessary in order to know. An individual must be in a space and witness what happens there to be able to understand and really know it. I am certainly on board here with the text's vision and with Grover's investment in the epistemological

significance of place. Furthermore, I read the book as a very specific kind of epistemological project: a feminist one. This is an element that Grover's memoir offers that sets it apart from most other AIDS texts, including those I analyze in my other chapters. I read *North Enough* as being uniquely invested in feminist epistemology in the way it imagines modes of knowledge acquisition that go outside the limitations of heteropatriarchal visions of what and how to know. This investment in the context of the HIV/AIDS crisis makes the book an especially important part of the AIDS literature archive.

There is a rich foundation in feminist epistemology. Most simply, feminist epistemology is the study of knowledge through a feminist lens. The simple answer in this case, however, does not suffice—like feminism itself, there are many kinds, voices, and perspectives in the feminist epistemology conversation, and I think it's valuable to listen to Grover as part of that discourse. Though not explicitly referred to as feminist epistemology, even mainstream western feminism coming out of the 1970s and 1980s deals in notions regarding who knows what, how they know, and why they know. For feminist epistemology specifically, however, it is additionally crucial to think about who is considered to know and have knowledge—my readings of *North Enough* allow me to take this thinking up and complicate it via my interpretations of witnessing as a means to push the boundaries of knowledge production and consumption, which, in turn, has the potential to alter how the subject experiences itself and its worlds.

Some of the thinking coming out of this latter part of the 20th century—especially ideas connected with mainstream white feminist thought—made claims about how gender may influence the ways people know what they do, arguing an essentialist point-of-view that women naturally, biologically, and necessarily are different from and thus understand the world differently than men. Gender essentialism hit mainstream markets and audiences with books like

John Gray's *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus.* I mention this text to underscore how pernicious messages about gender flooded audiences on a large scale, and as a consequence reinforced binary-driven ideologies. Of course, the essentialist debates found their ways into courtrooms and the academy as well. On the surface, the anti-porn wars—most notably fought by legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon and feminist writer Andrea Dworkin—argued that pornography was always violent toward and oppressive to woman; however, underneath this surface was the underlying assumption that men are "naturally" violent and women "naturally" victims, an essentialist argument. Positions like these make the stance that *women inherently know differently.* Not only does this universalizing reinforce binaristic notions of gender, but it also lacks the intersectional nuances feminisms should work to tease out.

Most feminist epistemology does take the necessary steps to engage with the nuances of how and why subjects know what they do—for instance, responsible, ethically-minded, feminist epistemology considers the ways in which cis-women can be socialized differently from cis-men according to various systems of knowledge that either privilege or oppress people depending on individual positionality. Feminist epistemology, in other words, weighs how knowledge production serves to disadvantage women and marginalized folks in a variety of social, economic, historical, and political ways—Grover threads these ideas throughout her memoir. However, Grover is implicitly picking up this conversation that started more explicitly before her publication: some of the early feminist philosophers that help to lay this foundational thinking include Patricia Hill Collins, Jane Duran, Donna Haraway, and Sandra Harding. Collins's and Duran's research narrows in on class and race, whereas Haraway and Harding center more on science and environmental studies, though where each of these feminist epistemologists converge is in thinking about how systems of power affect knowing in gendered ways.

One of the most valuable aspects of *North Enough* is the way it puts against the wall what it means to have and gain knowledge. Kristie Dotson, a philosopher of epistemology, helps me unpack and complicate how I read that aspect of Grover's memoir. Dotson's writing is particularly inspirational to me in the ways it builds a philosophical framework for studying Black women and Black girls that does not limit or assume knowledge. This type of framework galvanizes my reading of Grover's *North Enough* by helping bring to the surface for me the way genres of knowing and being work in the memoir. In Dotson's "Accumulating Epistemic Power: A Problem with Epistemology," she flags how police violence against Black people in the United States points to problems with epistemology; she claims that, "there are difficult-to-defeat arguments concerning the 'legitimacy' of police slayings against Black people that are indicative of problems with epistemology because of the epistemic power they accumulate toward resilient oblivion, which can have the effect of normalizing oppressive conditions" (130). For Dotson, then, a problem with epistemology is that it can engender a kind of systemic stupor that results in the murder of people at the hands of the state-actors. Obviously, her stakes are high, as they should be.

The implications of Dotson's insights about the problems with epistemology from the context of police killings of Black people may seem to have brought me away from why my interpretation of *North Enough* as an epistemological project is important—allow me to make the connection clear. Feminist epistemology at its best illustrates how what we know we know from within an oppressive society structured by white-cis-heteropatriarchal powers and demonstrates how that knowledge gains credibility. To be in a system of oppression is to know it and facilitate it. The problem of police violence against Black folks today is not the same as the problem of people dying from AIDS during the epidemic's height. Both of these problems, however, are

examples of state-sanctioned killings, unjustified murders that too often go unquestioned because they exist within a system of knowledge—white patriarchy—that normalizes, ignores, and refuses to change them.

By drawing this parallel I do not mean to equate the violences or diminish one over the other—my aim instead is to take inspiration from Dotson's suggestion to pay heed to the "problems with epistemology." Like Dotson, I do not think feminists should do away with creative and/or intellectual epistemological projects. I do though think feminist epistemological considerations are most successfully gained from by being paired with ontological meditations too. Working with these two feminist approaches in tandem allows me, for instance, as a reader, researcher, and teacher to best work through how *knowledge* is created and disseminated in a world that serves to oppress and often even kill *beings* deemed different and lesser from other beings. How, I keep wondering, has it become known that some beings are more important than others? How some should live and others die? Dotson initially engendered the urgency of tackling this inquiry for me by framing it inside identity, and Grover advances the urgency for me by pulling it outside the boundaries of identity. Moreover, feminist epistemology and ontology together can help me figure this out. For me, then, there is great benefit in reading *North Enough* for the ways it can be interpreted simultaneously as both an epistemological and ontological project. Glossing *North Enough* via these lenses give me a way into considering the overlaps and connections between knowing, being, and witnessing. Furthermore, thinking about knowing and being in such ways advantage me an additional angle from which to look at the power of witnessing and the way it affects subjectivity and subject formation.

I read the ethical production and apprehension of knowledge as a central concern in *North Enough*. For instance, Grover illustrates how knowledge should be gained by way of

place, by physically being in a location in order to learn of its history, culture, and people. Physical presence, then, is an essential part for emotional and principled growth. Contact and proximity, however, are not limited to feminist epistemological concerns. Feminist ontology also invests value in contact. Most broadly, ontology tries to make sense of beingness, the state or condition of existing or having existence, while feminist ontology is the study of being and beingness through a feminist lens. Another way of thinking about ontology is by considering how beings are categorized. So, for example, reflections regarding how distinctions between human and animal are drawn, between female and male, gay and straight. Feminist ontology, then, is concerned with how different categories of being/s can influence experiences and systems of oppression and privilege.

To help me push forward my readings of how *North Enough* blurs genres of being, I turn to Jennifer McWeeny's thinking in "Topographies of Flesh: Women, Nonhuman Animals, and the Embodiment of Connection and Difference." I read the ontological elements in Grover's memoir as revisioning what being is. What I see happening in the memoir, McWeeny frames as a new feminist ontological vision:

> What feminism needs is not to turn from ontological specificity altogether, but to engage a new kind of ontological project that is mindful of the dangers of essentialism and homogenization while nonetheless centering the embodied experiences and materiality of oppressed/resistant beings. Such an ontology must not only be able to account for the intricate and variable locations among women and other oppressed beings, but it should also work to reveal the relational complexities of feminists themselves, including the ways that their own habitual patterns of thought and action may be tied to the oppression of

> those very beings with whom they claim solidarity. A feminist ontology should not ask us to choose one side of the dualism between connection and difference; it should instead give us tools to reframe the conversation nondualistically, enabling us to think connection and difference simultaneously. (270)

McWeeny refers here to "women and other oppressed beings," though she does not explicitly delineate what she means by "beings." I think this is a notable imprecision and one that I see picked up in *North Enough*, as it blurs what constitutes being and beingness—a blurring that is one of the text's ontological strengths. In a clearer way, McWeeny's passage underscores that it should be central to feminist thinking to take into account the social, historical, and material experiences of subjects in order for connections to happen. Though this notion is not original to her, she does add her own particular voice by envisioning an ontology that:

> Conceives of groups of beings not in terms of essential properties, but in virtue of their proximity to one another in lines of lived, intercorporeal relations. As such, a topography of flesh provides us with a way to think connections and differences between beings at the level of embodiment without homogenizing beings, centering the activities of the oppressor, or obscuring the fluid relations of oppression and privilege among feminists themselves. (284)

It is this kind of ontology that privileges contact, connection, embodiment, and de-privileges the necessity of specifically or solely human-to-human contact; thus, opening up connections between different kinds of beings and even beings and objects. I also want to underscore my appreciation for McWeeny's sentiment that connection and difference can and should coexist.

I see these very kinds of connections played out, explored, and complicated in *North Enough*. One such moment begins when Grover is witnessing the birds in the Minnesota River National Wildlife Refuge:

> Their world [the birds'] simply *is*, and as enterprising border species, they make use of every scrap of it. Discrimination between the manufactured and the natural are human preoccupations. On 12 March, I saw an early spring robin eagerly feeding at something lying between a torn twelve-pack and a litter of beer bottles on the Cedar Avenue Bridge. When I got closer, I saw that it was a drying splat of human vomit. The robin was mining it for what he could.
>
> Sentiment, then, resides exclusively in us. Both deprived and blessed by no longer needing to mine other creatures' offcasts for our own sustenance, we have gone so far as to lose touch with what such substances as shit and vomit actually are… intestinal contents of creatures can and do provide food when none else is available… dung continues to play extra-excretory roles in our lives…
>
> Life neither begins nor ends with us. The metaphor of a web (of life) is apt because it has no structural beginning or end—its strength lies in the extraordinary distribution of tensions and connections along it. We humans are located somewhere in the midst of that web… and what we consume and excrete plays roles in the consumption and excretion of the creatures around us, just as it will of creatures who come after us. (115-17)

First, I want to underscore that at the core of this passage, its impetus really, is a moment of witnessing. The insights the passage holds—which I break down below—are born from the act of witnessing. Something happens when one witnesses something. Change occurs. For Grover, something becomes altered, a way of knowing shifts as she witnesses a robin eating vomit. The reader is signaled to the fact that an act of witnessing is occurring via the inclusion of a specific time, "12 March," and place "the Cedar Avenue Bridge," and by way of Grover using the word choice "saw" twice—together these writing choices emphasize that what she is sharing is a first-hand account, bearing witnessing.

Secondly, through her account, Grover illustrates a knowledge shift regarding how differently humans see themselves from other animals—"Discrimination between the manufactured and the natural are human preoccupations." Furthermore, Grover describes how the robin eats vomit, that which is excreted; she uses this moment of witnessing the bird mining "for what he could" to rethink her human self, and she opens opportunity for the reader to do the same. By considering/ reconsidering the human sentiment and connection to vomit, shit, and excrement, its role "in our lives," she causes a kind of rethinking, a de-inculcation. She gives us the opportunity to unlearn our connection to both the bird and to excrement, to animal and to object. By underscoring that humans are part of and connected to everything else in the "web (of life)," the distinction between the two species—the robin and the human—and the distinction between object and person—the excrement and the human—becomes less clear and even less significant. Also, as Grover illustrates the value of vomit and dung, typical assumptions about these objects becomes more nuanced. She demonstrates how the connections humans have to other animals and objects deserve more attention.

By blurring connections between animal and human and between object and human, the boundaries between such categories also get muddied. I read this as an investment in how the boundaries between identity categories—for instance, between woman and man or racial groups—are drawn and made to seem "natural." This idea that categories of being are natural is in line with the essentialist point of view that McWeeny is pushing against. My interpretation of I read Grover's passage about the bird and shit not only puts a spotlight on such boundaries, but I also want to underscore how the witnessing taking place in the passage puts tension on such distinctions, thus blurring them. This affords me to think outside of categories of being. This is a crucial move in order to consider how subjects should be understood in ways that go beyond and test the limitations of identity labels and genres of being—bearing witness is one way such a move can be made, as seen above via my readings of Grover's work. Importantly, this kind of move allows the boundaries of identity and identity politics to be complicated. *North Enough*, then, destabilizes categories of being via witnessing by calling into question the assumption that connections between a human being and another human being are somehow more legitimate or valuable than connections between a human being and a non-human being, like an animal or a tree or a landscape or other objects.

Making Space for Revisioning Subjectivity—Beyond Identity to Bearing Witness

I also think about the meaning of connections in my second chapter that glosses Delany's *The Mad Man.* There I forward that contact relationality—a way for the subject to experience personhood by connecting with others versus by way of being included into or excluded from a group or identity—facilitates in the divestment from identity. The stakes for me in that anti-

identitarian claim relate to how identity can be a pernicious means to gaining personhood. As a result, I argued that there is a need for an alternative to identity as a way to purchase subject position and experience a sense of self; in other words, there are better, or at least more varied, ways to understand oneself than via socially, culturally, spatially, and historically bound membership categories that serve as markers of difference. I essentially called for a divestment from identity via contact relationality. My readings of Grover's *North Enough* have nuanced and complicated that claim, however. I see now that a divestment from identity is not necessarily the way out of constrictive ways of being, nor a way to expand genres of being. My workings through *North Enough* via my close readings and writing/ revising this chapter have refined my understandings around identity—making them much less hard and fast. I want to step back some from the idea that identity should be ditched all together and instead think about additional ways to experience who we are and the worlds we inhabit, and I see witnessing as that supplemental and additional access point to subjectivity. In other words, instead of removing an ingredient from the subjectivity salad, I want to add bearing witness as an extra component. This shift in my thinking has helped me rail less on identity and pivot toward what I think deserves more attention: subjectivity, the formation of the subject, and how witnessing fits into the equation. To be frank, I experience this shift as liberating —rather than a closing down, it's an opening up.

One way the complicatedly important junction of subjectivity and witnessing has become clarified for me is via the concept of "faithful witnessing." In "Faithful Witnessing as Practice: Decolonial Readings of *Shadows of Your Black Memory* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,*" Yomaira Figueroa considers the potential of faithful witnessing in a literary context. The central implications for Figueroa relate to how "the present and the past demand redemption from the imperial colonial project of the past five centuries" (653). She makes clear that faithful

witnessing is a productive method of reading decolonial texts and consequently as a mode of resistance. Informed by Maria Lugones (especially *Pilgrimages/ Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalitions Against Multiple Oppressions*), she explains that faithful witnessing is:

> An act against oppression on the side of resistance, an act that though dangerous, can build coalitions between oppressed peoples and validate nondominant truths and experiences. The writing and reading of literature, then, is one way in which historical, present, and future possibilities can be imagined and offer lenses through which to witness resistance. (652)

Her explanation helps me understand that witnessing, then, is more than simply observing; it is a way of recognizing untold stories and histories, which, in the context of bearing witness and subjectivity, adds to its power and potential, especially from feminist and decolonial perspectives. Figueroa goes on to explain that "the literary practice of faithful witnessing enables the narrators to bear witness to stories, histories, and truths that may have gone untold, unnoticed, and silenced" (652)—this description of faithful witnessing is a valuable one to me, and it is one kind of witnessing I see happening in *North Enough.* What I see happening in Grover's memoir makes a correlation between witnessing and subjectivity: witnessing permits the subject to experience and have a sense of self.

Early in *North Enough* Grover warns the reader that: "There are dangers in reading landscapes and other cultural artifacts as texts" (18), and yet she does exactly this kind of reading over and over again. I read this move that she makes— rhetorically drawing a line and then crossing it—as being a kind of hermeneutic tool. In other words, by introducing the idea that landscapes cannot be read or interpreted as texts—cannot be treated hermeneutically—and then

doing exactly that, Grover encourages me to ask who and why should do this kind of reading and interpretation. The answer for me is feminists.

To bear out my reasoning, I bring attention to a seemingly straight-forward declarative passage: "Land is not only a representation. It is also a physical palimpsest upon which complex human, animal, and geologic acts, most of which are not primarily symbolic, have been written in flesh and tree and rock" (19). At first read these two sentences parallel each other: "land" (or its pronoun "it") is the main subject of both sentences, as is "is" the central verb in both. The content of both sentences claims that land deserves more than metaphorical status. The second sentence has more length, more weight—it tells the reader not what land is not but instead what land is: a tangible text that is written on repeatedly, though still bears witness to earlier tales. The land—this palimpsest manuscript—is witness, Grover tells us, and its testimony tells of the acts from different beings: human, animal, and geological. By giving this latter message more emphasis, then, it communicates to the reader that reading the land physically deserves more attention than reading it representationally. Grover is telling us that reading the physical land as a way to gain knowledge warrants more emphasis than reading the metaphor of land. Interpreting land as a physical body that can and should be read is a feminist mode of reading because it centers decolonial histories and because it centers knowing by way of reading land rather than by reading more conventional texts. In other words, by claiming that knowledge production comes from reading land as text (an unconventional/ feminist kind of reading), alternative modes of producing and understanding knowledge are laid out as possibilities.

By placing together in an equalizing kind of way—via the prepositional phrase "upon which complex human, animal, and geological acts… have been written"—this passage underscores what I see as a feminist understanding of being as well. The acts of humans,

animals, and geology are categorized together as the that which get written on the text of land. By categorizing animals and geology with humans, humans become less centered, thus centering what are typically not considered beings. The effect of this shift of center opens the potential to consider beings that fall outside of typical classifications or categories—again both a feminist and decolonial move, because it thinks about what it means to be human in ways that push beyond the boundaries of heteronormative, patriarchal, western-centric comprehensions and ideologies. This shift in thinking reflects an important sentiment that places special emphasis on the land as a physical and material record rather than a discursive record.

I turn to Alexander Weheliye in order to best flesh out the implications of this shift that is being demonstrated in Grover's passage and in *North Enough* more broadly. In *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, Weheliye—like with Dotson, as noted earlier—explains the dangers of structuring society around knowledge:

> In the parlance of comparison, diasporic populations appear as real objects instead of objects of knowledge…as a result, the empirical existence of national boundaries, or linguistic differences… become the ultimate indicators of differentiation and are in danger of entering the discursive record as transcendental truths, rather than as structures and institutions that have served repeatedly to relegate black subjects to the status of western modernity's nonhuman others. (31)

For Weheliye, then, one hazard of ordering our world in an epistemological fashion is that doing so others certain groups of people to the point of classifying them as non-human beings; he is contextualizing these dangers in terms of black subjects but identifies that the stakes impact

humanity overall. For him strictly categorizing human beings "does not allow for the initiation of different humanities" (32) and thus he calls for a structuring of society and politics that conceives "humanity as a relational ontological totality" (32). In a sense, then, he calls for a conflation of genres of the human. Grover is making a different, though parallel call: she calls for the conflation of human and non-human beings. These two stances do overlap some, however. They both agree that there should be less emphasis put on an identity structure based on knowledge and more emphasis placed on a structure grounded in the material. When Grover blurs categories of being in her memoir, I read it as illustrating a kind of material-based identity. In my understandings of both Weheliye and Grover, I see potential for revolutionary social structuring that depends on notions of being(ness) that land outside conventional categories of what is valued as a being and what is not. Witnessing is a way to do the necessary kind of restructuring that Weheliye and Grover call for, and, furthermore, it is a way for the subject to have more agency in its subjectivity. This clarifies my idea that *I witness therefore I am*. The power of bearing witness, then, is so great that it can even make hazy the lines of what constitutes beingness.

Another Vista—Witnessing Being

As I begin to close up this chapter, I want to come back around to how and why feminism plays a role in this conversation. A primary aim of feminist work is to cultivate a system in which all people are treated humanely—not only treated with compassion but also as a human being. Why then do I make a call for a restructuring of understanding and being that would

consequently blur the line between human and non-human? This seems counterproductive, no? For the answer I settle into one of *North Enough*'s primary literary sentiments.

I see in *North Enough* plenty of moments that exemplify a restructuring of beingness, but of all these moments the ones that are most successful at blurring the line between human and non-human existence are told by Grover while in municipally-isolated Churchill, which is "some five hundred air miles north of Winnipeg" (*North Enough* 148). These are the moments when the nuanced shadings of existence are most sharply witnessed. As Grover logs what she witnesses while traveling to this landscape, the reader is quickly and sharply tapped into the personification of non-human animal life:

> Though a mammal with four legs, the polar bear is classified as a marine animal by many sea-life biologists. On land, it can move very fast—bursts of 30 mph—but its usual gait is slow and swinging, the small head swaying like a heavy flower form a stalklike neck. It looks somehow absentminded, as if in thought it is still moving through water or across undulant new sea ice. In the water, the bear's identity as a marine mammal is incontestable; its movements are fluid and weightless as those of water. (148)

Yes, the personification of the polar bear that is employed here serves to blur human and non-human animals, but this is not an especially creative or unique tool. What I find much more striking is the pairing of the words "bear" and "identity" because it begins to call into question how and why beings are categorized by making its identity place/ materially dependent—it is one being on land and another in water. In fact, it seems as though the bear morphs according to space—could it be that its beingness is not informed by but rather determined by place.

I also want to draw attention to the way the polar bear is made into both human and object—the bear is personified by way of being associated with identity, something more typically assigned to humans in common parlance, but the bear is also objectified, as it is tethered to the properties of water. The bear, then, reads as animal, human, and object—making the distinction between non-human, human, and material thing less clear, and as a consequence the genres of being are further conflated. This conflation is compounded by the way Grover illustrates the bear as both land and sea creature, mammal and amphibian. Even the bear's taxonomy confuses categories of existence.

The effect of this confusion helps me to answer the question I started with in this section: if a primary aim of feminist work is to cultivate a system in which all people are treated humanely—not only treated with compassion but also as a human being—then why make a call for a restructuring of thought that would blur the line between human and non-human? Nuancing the distinction between what makes beings different from each other levels the social and political playing fields. This move makes it so no category of beings is more important or valuable than another, and consequently it becomes harder to condemn, do violence upon, or oppress groups of people based on the genre of being classification they fit into. This is not meant to be a homogenizing move. The idea is not to interpret all beings as the same—difference, of course, is valuable—the idea, rather, is to consider all different being as existing in the same category: the category of having beingness. Lots of different things in one big basket.

Through my interpretation of Grover's work, I see a way to effect and be affected by this restructuring of beingness, and her testimony of it allows her to pass it along to the reader. In fact, she explains that she, "Wanted to witness this. To see the bear and the place where glaciers that formed Minnesota and Wisconsin had their final stand" (148). Here she explicitly notes her

desire to be witness; notice, too, though, that the place, rather than the animal like above, is being personified, which further meshes living being with non-living being. This entanglement pushes the envelope even further with regard to what constitutes being and existence. My readings of *North Enough* through a feminist lens, then, open the possibility of reevaluating conventional genres of being, ways of reading, and what reading can do to us.

Ultimately, my interpretation of *North Enough* centers around how and why a critique of the human is necessary and necessarily feminist. Rethinking what the subject is and how it is constructed needs to be a central aim of feminism today; the kind of blurring between subject and object that takes place in *North Enough* opens a door to the kind of thinking that ultimately has the potential to untether us from oppressive conceptions of what people are or who they should be. In other words, identity constructs that strictly define and delineate what is means to be a woman are constricting, and when women step outside of those boundaries, we are often further marginalized. Of course, it is not only women who are affected by the limitations of identity-based notions of the subject; queers, people of color, and other marginalized groups can also benefit from a blurring of genres of being, because it opens up for more options and greater individual agency to define oneself outside of rigid categories of being. This is even more reason why contemporary intersectional feminism needs to take up the call to rethink and revise the subject. What comes out of this rethinking is an intersectional feminist queer knowledge about the subject—an unconventional knowing that expands what the subject is and how it is constructed.

In many ways, *North Enough* does not explicitly read as a queer piece of literature or as an AIDS memoir. Grover does not underscore her own queer identity much at all, and she flees San Francisco—one of the centers of the epidemic and where she was working as an AIDS

worker—early in the text. However, my readings see the text as most certainly queer and also as an important part of the AIDS literature archive. The memoir's queerness is most predominant in the ways it blurs the line between person and thing, subject and object. Grover also illustrates how devastating the AIDS pandemic was in ways many other AIDS memoirs do not. The impact of the crisis went far beyond city-centers. Grover left San Francisco and her work there helping folks with AIDS, but with her she carried the scars, so much so that she saw them represented on the wooded lands of Minnesota: "I am innocent of the urge to metaphorize every tree, shrub, lichen. I know only that the land seems vaguely distressed, the forest mournful and neglected — not at all what I had hoped to find" (18). Now, decades later, in the midst of living through and bearing witness to another pandemic, I'm afraid we too are in a place that we hoped not to find. The societal scars from the AIDS crisis have resurfaced during the age of COVID-19. Again, we see how a pandemic serves as an X-ray revealing fractures, disparities, and inequities in our world, countries, and local communities. However, for so many—especially folks who are part of communities of color or live in impoverished areas—these fractures did not need revealing because they are lived and felt every day. And so, what, if anything, did we learn from the scars of the AIDS crisis? Now that we are in this place, what did we learn from that place? I agree with a lesson Grover takes away: we need to "salvage beauty from loss" (166). Hopefully one beauty salvaged will be an expanded understanding of and empathy for the subject.

One expanded understanding I have taken away relates to the construction of the subject. Through my experience of writing and revising this chapter, both inside and outside the context of a pandemic, I have made what I see as a significant discovery. I've discovered that what is most centrally consequential for me is really about subject formation. I've discovered—by way of spending so much time thinking about Grover's memoir and about the act of witnessing—that

the real stakes for me personally, and beyond, are less about a divestment from or revisioning of identity and more so about the process the subject undergoes during its construction. My intervention, ultimately, means to put focus on how witnessing is an essential part of that process.

How does the formation of the subject work? I started this dissertation with that question foremost in my mind. I kept coming back to it as I wrote and revised this chapter. As I did so, I realized that witnessing is not simply a way to establish and rethink subject position in the world, nor is it simply a way to experience existence. I found that witnessing is more than that. Bearing witness is an essential element or step in the formation of the subject. In this realm of subject formation, I have always put a lot of emphasis on interpellation. Spending time thinking about witnessing has helped complicate my understanding of interpellation as well. I've realized that witnessing—the act of seeing, of observing—does not take the place of interpellation—turning toward a call—but I do wonder how these two moments that take place during subject formation inform, complicate, and unwrap each other. Understanding witnessing as part of the process in the construction of the subject nuances notions around interpellation. I had understood interpellation as *the* moment of subject formation; however, now I have discovered that witnessing is a crucial and valuable part of the *process* of subject formation. I more clearly see that there is not *the* moment. Subject formation does not happen suddenly and then it's over. It is an ongoing, continual, flexible, unstable process. Ok, so what? The implications of subject formation being a process rather than a moment signal that the subject has more power and agency during the process and that the process can encourage and result in less conformity. Let me also make clear that I see that there are two central elements to the act of witnessing: *seeing* and *reporting* that which they have observed and experienced. The reporting or attesting to

element of this process gives the subject a voice in their own narrative of becoming, a voice in their story of subject formation, and it gives them a voice in the broader cultural and historical archives. The act of witnessing, thus, allows the subject to be a more active participant in their own creation.

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CHAPTER 4:

A CITY OF ARCHIVED HARBINGERS: BDSM & AIDS IN AMSTERDAM

"We need to be more conscious about including the older material in the contemporary canon of Queer Studies… we need to do more to overcome the institutional deficiencies that constrict access to older knowledge. We must continue to develop organizational structures to guarantee the conservation, transmission, and development of queer knowledges."
-Gayle Rubin, "Geologies of Queer Studies: *It's Déjà Vu All Over Again*"

A Path Toward Activism via Pleasure & Desire

As I begin to draw my dissertation to a close, I want to take a moment here to glance backward. My first three chapters examined elements at work during subject formation. The first chapter focused on interpellation, the second on relationality, and the third on witnessing. Giving attention to and analyzing each of these factors has allowed me to better understand how subjects are constructed and have a stronger grasp on the powers that affect that process. My project has also opened a way for me to recognize the negative effects identity has on our subjectivities, and, as a result, I have made the call for a destabilization and revisioning of identity—especially as the central way of fashioning subjectivity. While thinking through these ideas, I have considered what happens when identity becomes less stable, thus causing me to reflect on what subjects can turn towards as alternatives to the labels, boxes, and categories inherent in how identity works. For instance, I have postulated that connection, relationality, bearing witness, pleasure, and desire are alternative means for the subject be constructed—these are methods by which we can experience our sense of self outside of the boundaries of identity. Furthermore, such alternatives can be ways for the subject to approach fresh avenues of experiencing personhood at the personal, community, and political levels. A subjectivity built from and on novel ways of

being—such as one centered around desire and pleasure—is an act of activism because doing so can serve to reform a stagnant social system that relies on identity politics which feed into hetero-patriarchal and white supremacist ideologies.

Let us remember that identity is based on socially, culturally, spatially, and historically bound membership categories that serve as markers of difference; identities are a collection of social categories. We are put in these socially constructed boxes for political reasons and reasons connected to power relations. Identity politics is really all about bracketing subjects off into a set number of categories which divides people and stifles difference, and without difference there is no queerness, and as I have hope I have made clear throughout this project, I endorse more queerness, most certainly not less. Not to mention that when people are defined my identity labels, prejudices will inevitably arise. The way subject construction currently functions, identity is one of if not the most fundamental ways subjects understand who they are and how they fit into the world. Identity has become our personhood. In other words, identity is our way into subjectivity.

One of my claims, then, has been that as an avenue to personhood identity is not sufficient. A subjectivity based on a person's physicality and what they feel, do, and experience—rather than predominately on a limited number of predefined identification categories—opens a path for the subject to have more personal agency in how they participate in and define their personhood. A personhood born from desire and pleasure, to be more specific, allows it so subjection—the process of the subject being produced—is controlled more by the subject rather than by dominant belief systems and the labels produced by those ideologies. If we experience ourselves not solely through categories but also through desire and what we find pleasure in, well, put simply, it makes life more satisfying, intimate, and personal.

Both Judith Butler and Fred Moten[15] have referred to subjection as a kind of violent process, which I agree with; however, I contend that it can be less violent if the subject is able to rely more on individual experience and desire for their sense of self. In other words, the violence of subjection can be mitigated if the subject has more control over the process via their own personal experiences and passions. Thus, the alternative framework that I am proposing is, yes, an anti-identitarian one, but, more importantly, it is framework of becoming that allows for the subject to have more power in their own being, as it is based on their own desires. The framework I am forwarding is this: the production of the subject should rely less on identitarian notions of the self and more so on an individual experience that comes from erotic desire. Though pleasure and desire are often attached to identity, this connection is not necessary, especially when focusing on the *experience* of desire rather than on what or who is desired. Putting emphasis on the experience emphasizes the individual having the desire or taking part in the pleasure instead of a group identity. Moreover, I see this form of subjection that is based on the individual's experience of pleasure and desire as a mode of activism, because embracing one's desires as a way of existing is a form of protest against an existence based on the suffocating boxes of hegemonic ideologies and identities. In other words, by centering and prioritizing the experience of desire and pleasure, subjects can break free from prescribed categories of being.

In this chapter, then, I take with me the lessons learned from the previous three chapters about identity, subjectivity, and the elements at play during subject formation, and I think about what is next. I discover that one of the next steps for me relates to what I see as a kind of activism, one that centers on pleasure and desire as alternatives subjects can turn toward to

[15] *Psychic Life of Power* and *In the Break*, respectively.

define and experience their personhood. I contend, furthermore, that pleasure and desire can be idiosyncratic modes of activism. The materials I study and interpret in this chapter have given me a lesson about activism, what it can be, and the power it holds. Activism can be an individual and personal act—it can be action taken to bring about personal change, not just social. In that vein, I write myself into this project by way of incorporating some of my personal life experiences.

But first a roadmap. To begin, I share the time and spacial context of my thinking—how Amsterdam is a meaningful place both a personally and historically. Next, I introduce and interpret objects I found while researching in Amsterdam that push my thinking about sex, sexuality, the AIDS crisis, and subjectivity—theses pieces illustrate for me slippages in queer time and signal to what may be in queer future. In wrapping up, I consider and reflect on what it means to "use" AIDS literature as a lens to think about queerness, memoir, and subject formation. This is a general roadmap. However, for full disclosure, this roadmap is not complete. This chapter does some meandering. My journey has been convoluted at times, and I wanted this chapter to perform that. Thus, my last chapter here means to act out the kind of intellectual, academic, professional, and personal journey I have experienced: it has not been a straight line; one might say it's even been queer—unconventional and hard to define. Though there has never been one clear or linear path, I have most certainly picked up many lessons and insights along the way. Like that journey, this chapter winds around and observes and learns along the road.

Sex in Amsterdam

While I traversed the streets of Amsterdam for the first time in 2017, I knew straight away that sex is an integral part of the city's present and past. Amsterdam's relationship with sex is a notably complicated one. On the one hand, Amsterdam has earned its reputation for being one of most sexually liberal cities in the world. It is the cultural epicenter of the Netherlands, a country where prostitution and the operation of brothels is legal. In 2001 the country also became the first to legalize same-sex marriage. Trans citizens seeking medical care for transitioning have national support as well. On the other hand, however, in recent years the Dutch government has, "created an environment that hampers those [sex] workers 'ability to independently drive economic growth and development – the definition of successful business… [which] further stigmatizes the profession" and delegitimizes sex workers (humanityinaction.org). Amsterdam has also received its fair share of criticism due to claims that its tolerant attitude toward queer communities is solely fueled by capitalist and neoliberal aims. Furthermore, non-public pop-up clinics have become necessary for transgender folks to receive healthcare because these clinics "are free of charge and don't require prior appointment, making it a much faster and more accessible alternative to the two-year waiting period that has become standard for transgender people seeking a medical transition in the Netherlands" (equaltimes.org). So, yes, Amsterdam and sex have a complex and sometimes paradoxical relationship. However, this is one of the reasons why I turn to one of the sex capitals of the world—the complicated relationship Amsterdam has with sex has fostered a culture of critical dialogue around the role of sex and sexuality in the lives and communities of its citizens and abroad. In other words, the healthy debate and discourse that has been taking place in Amsterdam for decades makes it an ideal milieu to explore the capacity of sexual desire and pleasure.

The knotty and contradictory connection between sex and the city is paved on its cobblestone streets. As I wondered through the city center, De Wallen (the area most well known as the red-light district), the Jordaan neighborhood, De Pijp, Amsterdam Noord, and beyond, I readily saw the presence of sex in the present day. It was everywhere: the flyers littering the ground advertising live sex shows, the many sex toy shops, the glowing lights inviting folks into peep shows, the sex museum, the erotic museum, the Condomerie (a condom speciality shop), the Prostitute Information Center (PIC), the LGBTQ info booth, the leaflets scattered in bars for sex tours, the statue of "Belle" who proudly stands on Oudekerksplein representing respect for sex workers globally, and, yes, of course, the windows—some with sex workers hanging out waiting for business, others with curtains closed, presumably as business transpires.

Amsterdam capitalizes on its relationship with sex by making it easily accessible to travelers. Tourists can visit the Sex Museum and the Erotic Museum to find kitschy sex items from Amsterdam and beyond. In many ways, Oude Kerk, the oldest church in Amsterdam originally built in the 13th century in the middle of what is now the red-light district, embodies the complicated and historic connection between sex and religion in the city and state. The city profited from the culture of sex work, while at the same time supporting Christian ideologies that condoned elicit sexual behavior. To add to such contradictions, both before and after the Reformation, the church itself financially gained from the exchange of money for sex because many sailors passing through the city would pay for penance after visiting with prostitutes working outside of Oude Kerk. Links between the state, religion, sex, and history can also be found at the Homomonument. This monument is just outside of Westerkerk, another one of the city's major Christian churches, and it memorializes the gay and lesbian people killed during the

Holocaust, though it has come to stand more broadly as a memorial for all gays and lesbians who have been persecuted because of their sexualities.

Indeed, much of the present and past relationship Amsterdam has with sex is readily available, worn on the city's sleeve. However, there is a sex in Amsterdam that is not so much on the surface—and it's a sex that I think is a pivotal part of its past and present. It's a type of sex that I argue is necessary to factor in while considering the relationship the city has with sex, with AIDS, and with the power of erotic desire and pleasure: BDSM—bondage, discipline, sadism, and masochism. More accurately, BDSM is the sex, erotic practices, kinks, and fetish desires that center around power exchange and/ or pain. It is a sexual practice that is deeply committed to and centered around desire and pleasure. The customs and communities involved in BDSM, including the gay leather scene, in Amsterdam may not be as emblematic as let's say the sex workers poised in windows[16], but BDSM is arguably just as crucial to the city's yesterday and today. Furthermore, looking to BDSM literature and art provides lessons about the power of erotic desire that move beyond the streets of Amsterdam—it gives a window into how desire, pleasure, and sexuality are each a potential point of power and change for the subject.

While writing about and researching leather communities—a vital group in the BDSM world—Gayle Rubin calls to reorganize the presiding oppressive sexual hierarchy. She notes that, "the sexual outlaws—boy-lovers, sadomasochists, prostitutes, and transpeople, among others—have an especially rich knowledge of the prevailing system of sexual hierarchy and of how sexual controls are exercised. These populations of erotic dissidents have a great deal to

[16] Notably, however, with recent campaigns to "clean up" the red-light district and make it more family- friendly, window spaces are being shut down at an alarming rate and the new major of Amsterdam, Femke Halsema, has even suggested that the city " 'must dare to think about the red-light district without prostitution' " (thegaurdian.com).

contribute to the reviving radical debate on sexuality" (*Deviations* 136). Amsterdam is a central place where not only does this kind of reorganizing happen, but also a place where a reprioritizing of sexuality and sexual resistance takes place. I turn to the sex outlaws there—the BDSM and leather kinksters and erotic artists—to consider what happens when sexually deviant desires become a priority. Rubin looks to sexual outlaws and their communities to study and expose how systems of power operate. Though I am undoubtedly inspired by her work, what I have discovered is not so much at the macro/ institutional level. What I have found by turning to literature and art by and about the BDSM sexual outlaws in Amsterdam during the AIDS crisis affords a more individual-level lesson: embracing and acting upon aberrant desires and pleasures can be a personal act of resistance and activism.

I bring my focus to Amsterdam, BDSM, and AIDS because of a link that connects all three: the city, the folks who are part of BDSM communities, and those who have been affected by HIV/AIDS have a firm grasp on the power of sex and sexuality. To begin unpacking the relationship between Amsterdam, BDSM, and AIDS, I start below with an object that illustrates how complicated, and at times even slippery, this relationship is. The object brings together visual and verbal art that represents BDSM/ leather practices and communities in Amsterdam in the early 1980's. It was created by two artists, Nigel Kent and Jacob Lowland. The kind of radical social justice and deviant sex practices men like Kent and Lowland were practicing helped to lay the necessary groundwork queer communities—the gay BDSM one in this particular instance—needed in order to survive the epidemic. In other words, they and their work helped keep the gay BDSM leather community vibrant, despite the physical and emotional onslaught AIDS was causing. Now, looking back, I see the kind of work they were doing as haunting. This haunting is both mournful and prescient. The feeling of haunting I discern in their

work illustrates to me the kinds of foundational labor that thankfully prevented the total destruction of the radicalness of queerness. The kind of work they were doing helped make it so that the AIDS epidemic did not cause all queers to assimilate out of fear or necessity. In fact, they were even making knowledge and memory about AIDS before the epidemic even hit. Spooky. Even queer.

Discovering Harbingers

I had to do some digging in order to start getting at the story of the city's relationship with BDSM and AIDS. I began at IHLIA (Internationaal Homo/Lesbisch Informatiecentrum en Archief, International Gay/ Lesbian Information Center and Archive)—an archive a short jaunt from central station that houses Europe's largest LGBT heritage collection[17]. It was there that I got the inkling that the intersection between BDSM and AIDS in Amsterdam was one that needed more attention. But why exactly? What happens at this both literal and metaphorical crossway? What was the BDSM scene like when the epidemic hit Amsterdam? What was the already established kink community's response? What was and is the role of the kink community—and sub-sub-cultures within it like Leather groups—in this context? Can being positioned at this intersection tell me something about the power of the subject and their sexual desires? Or tell something about the broader role of sexuality?

I sat in the basement of the archive, sifting through years and years' worth of photographs, flyers, leaflets, brochures, short erotic fiction, magazines, buttons, pamphlets, stickers, articles, and pornography that document Amsterdam's—and Europe's more broadly—

[17] Many, many thanks to archivists Jasper Wiedman and Niels de Konink for all their generosity and help while I researched at IHLIA.

LGBTQ history. The first object that really struck me was at initial glance an unassuming one: a small orange booklet with a modest cover, black text inscribing: *Jacob Lowland pp The Gay Stud's Guide to Amsterdam and Other Sonnets 1981 Edition*.[18] What I discovered inside was far less reserved than its humble cover. This booklet—brief, less than 10 pages, but immense in significance both culturally and personally—concisely renders a moment, place, and community in time. It was this object that became the impetus for my journey to understand what happens at the junction of BDSM and AIDS in Amsterdam near the end of the 20th century.

[18] Works cited entry notes this source by its original and inside cover title and name used by author: Jim Holmes, *Views of Kent.*

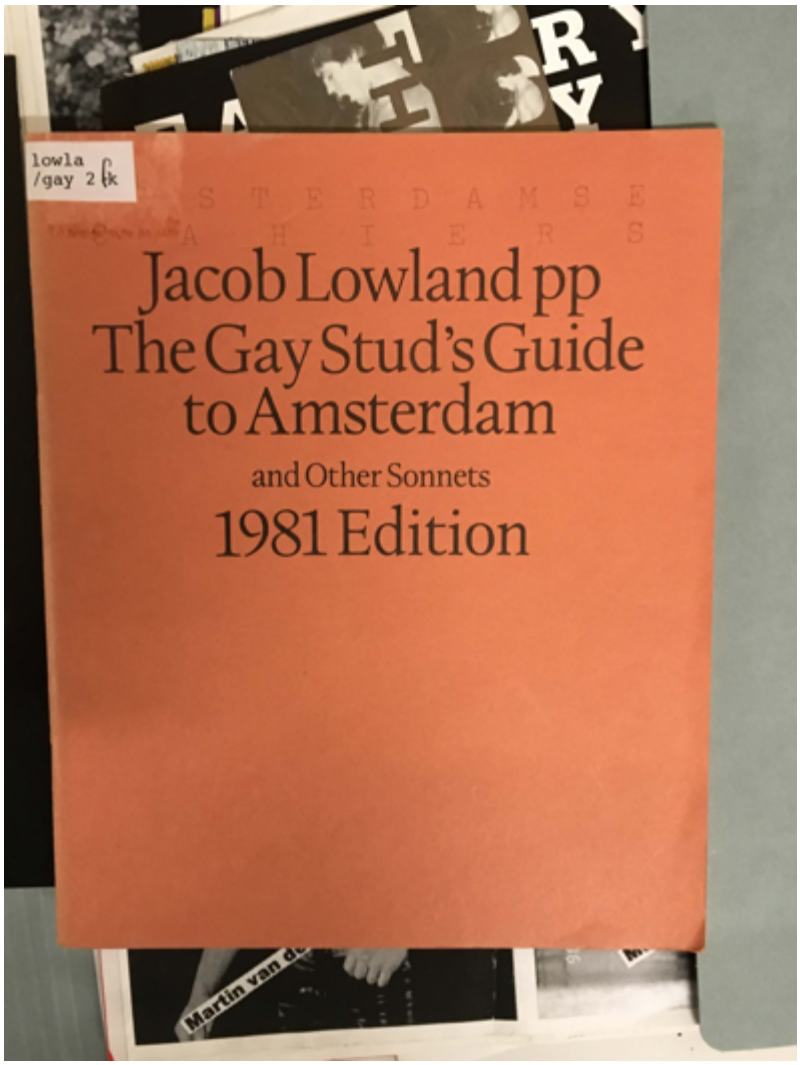


Figure 9:
***The Gay Stud's Guide to Amsterdam and Other Sonnets*, 1981 edition**

Allow me to start with some background on the booklet and its authors. It was first available during an art opening of Nigel Kent's exhibition *Focus 1980* at RoB Gallery—an art gallery started by Rob Meijer (1933-1990) that featured male erotic art, a novelty on the European art gallery scene (https://www.leatherhistory.eu). Eventually after Meijer's death from AIDS-related complications, RoB Gallery evolved from being an art gallery to a fetish and leather-gear shop, which it still remains today. The booklet object I discovered at IHLIA was given to those who came to the opening of Kent's one-man exhibition on October 19, 1980. Inside the booklet, it explains that "*Views of Kent*, a cycle of four poems, was written by Jim Holmes in September 1980 in an attempt to reflect in words four phases in the recent art of Nigel Kent alias James D. The plates accompanying the cycle [each poem is paired with a Kent illustration] were selected by Rob" (page number not available). This booklet brings together two men—Jacob Lowland, aka Jim Holmes, and Nigel Kent, aka James D, and with it a snapshot of the gay kink and leather scenes in Amsterdam in the early 1980's.

Nigel Kent was born in Australia in 1933, moved to England in 1959, and then to Amsterdam in 1973, which is where he began his career as an artist. His drawings are in the style of Tom of Finland; in fact, his very first showing was alongside Tom of Finland at RoB Gallery in 1978. Though much lesser known than Tom of Finland, Kent is "regarded as one of the most important artists working in the leather and S/M genre" (https://www.tomoffinlandfoundation.org/foundation/Tom-Of-Finland-Galleries/art-and-artists/kent-nigel/kent-nigel-bio.htm). His finely detailed work is often in graphite black and grays, though some drawings use muted pinks and blues. Most of his art is faceless, depicting an anonymous figure—usually very muscular, often rope and leather bound, and almost always displaying a clothed bulging crotch or naked engorged cock. Think Leathermen portraits

illustrating bondage and Domination/ submission scenes—rope-tied testicles type stuff. Kent has described his body of work as:

> *dick and balls* concentrated. That stems from my street-wise crotch-watching. Also many of the action torsos are headless, which is very important to me, as my intention is that the viewer can choose to place himself, or a friend, within the circumstances of the fantasy that he is viewing. I hope that it opens the range of my work to a much wider audience. As it were, 'Something for everyone.' (https://www.tomoffinlandfoundation.org/foundation/Tom-Of-Finland-Galleries/art-and-artists/kent-nigel/index.htm)

The artist has also noted that much of his work has been inspired by personal experience, making it quite autobiographical in nature.

Like Kent, Jim Holmes (sometimes publishing under the pseudonym 'Jacob Lowland') was an expatriate who eventually made Amsterdam his home. He was born James Stratton Holmes in 1924 in middle America Iowa and died of AIDS related complications on November 6, 1986. As a young man, Holmes taught high school and eventually earned both a Bachelor's and Master's degree in English in the United States. He then moved to the Netherlands in 1949, where he worked as an academic, translator of Dutch poetry, and poet and fiction writer (https://www.leatherhistory.eu/?p=18). His writings open a raw and sometimes explicit window into gay masculinity and Amsterdam's leather scene, all while promoting sexual freedom; in these ways, he was an activist for gay liberation and for fetish lifestyles. His homoerotic poetry was no doubt groundbreaking for its time and remains an essential part of both gay literature and the BDSM art archive. Once the AIDS crisis broke, Holmes did not sway in his insightful and sincere considerations of what gay sex meant:

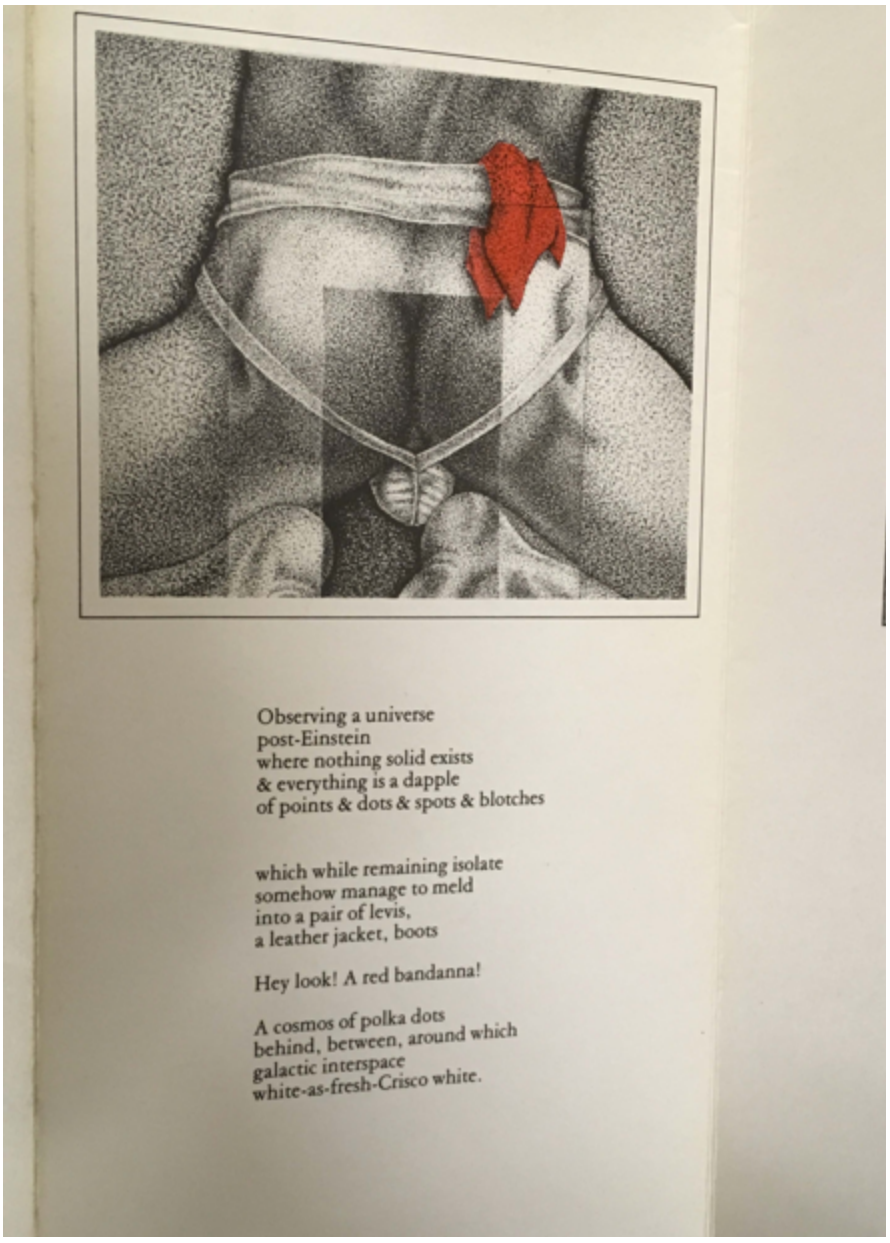
> I don't know what to write. We have arrived at a dead point, just because my attitude has always been that of the free homosexual of 1981: we're ahead of the others, while heterosexuals make all kinds of problems we can enjoy a wide variety of sexual acts. Nobody had expected something like this could happen. There were diseases before Aids – and a lot more in New York than here in Amsterdam – but they were curable. And suddenly appears a new disease which one already could have caught five years ago and there is nothing to do about it: now we know that we could have been more precautious. It's weird, I don't know how I can work that in my poems. (https://www.leatherhistory.eu/?p=18)

His sentiment here is very much reflected in his poetry written from 1981-85. This part of his body of work reads as if there is a ghost in the room, the haunting presence of the epidemic—he clearly wrestled with how to write about AIDS and how to express the havoc it caused in the queer BDSM and Leathermen communities in Amsterdam.

Haunting Objects, Phantom Crisis

The art and writing by Kent and Holmes in *The Gay Stud's Guide to Amsterdam and Other Sonnets* is ghostly in its own right, a sort of phantom harbinger. It haunted the future and now it haunts the past. This type of haunting is a necessary process in order to suss out the queer experience of yesterday and today. Heather Love focuses on "histories of injury" while making the argument that, "as long as homophobia continues to centrally structure queer life, we cannot afford to turn away from the past; instead, we have to risk the turn backward, even if it means opening ourselves to social and psychic realities we would rather forget" (29). *The Gay Stud's*

Guide to Amsterdam and Other Sonnets is filled with emblems signaling to a "history of injury," forcing the reader to do what Love suggests is necessary: face the past. For instance, when I first saw the image with a red bandana hanging from the subject's g-string and read the accompanying poem which directly addresses the reader, commanding us to, "Hey look! A red bandanna!" (Figure 10), I instantly read this red bandana as a representation of the AIDS epidemic and those it affected.



Observing a universe
post-Einstein
where nothing solid exists
& everything is a dapple
of points & dots & spots & blotches

which while remaining isolate
somehow manage to meld
into a pair of levis,
a leather jacket, boots

Hey look! A red bandanna!

A cosmos of polka dots
behind, between, around which
galactic interspace
white-as-fresh-Crisco white.

Figure 10:
***Untitled,* from *The Gay Stud's Guide to Amsterdam and Other Sonnets*, 1981**
(originally printed in 1980)

The color red, and red ribbons even more so (to which the bandana in Kent's image bears an eerie resemblance), has so firmly become connoted with AIDS in my mind, like with many others. As a child growing up in the United States in the 1980's and 1990s, this association was firmly implanted in me—whether it was from non-profit campaigns like the Visual AIDS's Red Ribbon Project promoting AIDS visibility or from large-scale benefit rock shows like the Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert in 1992, the culture around me equated red with AIDS. The connection between the color red and HIV/AIDS continues today, often in a neoliberal manner; think about, for example, consumers purchasing red iPhones as a way to exhibit their support to the AIDS cause or the product (RED) campaign, which sells consumers goods as a way to outwardly demonstrate their awareness of AIDS. Of course, it's also worth flagging that because HIV must enter the bloodstream in order for transmission to occur, the association with the virus and the color of blood is even further underscored.

Yet, despite these connotations that gave me the immediate connection I had between the red bandana and AIDS, this was not the association implied by Kent's image or Lowland's text. I know this with certainty because the art pamphlet was first distributed in 1980, and the first reported cases of HIV/ AIDS (though not referred to in those terms yet) were not until 1981. So given the temporal and cultural context of both of the authors, the red bandana was not about AIDS, rather its significance, at least in part, relates to the handkerchief/ hanky code. This code system was a way for gay men to outwardly though subtly communicate to other gay men their sexual desires, such as being a top or bottom (i.e., being on the left or right side of the slash in a Dominant/ submissive or Master/ slave dynamic). The red handkerchief was code for someone interested in fist-fucking. In other words, a man whose kink was fist-fucking could wear a red hanky hanging out of his back pocket and this would communicate his proclivities to other gay

men “in the know.” Nevertheless, there is something now quite haunting about the red color in the image, text, and the timing—it was so close to when the first cases are reported and folks started to die from the disease. I read Kent’s image, thus, as a haunting harbinger of the crisis.

Lowland’s poem that accompanies Kent’s art is also a kind of haunting slip in time—this slip is as ghostly as it is impossible to ignore. He writes:

> Observing a universe
> post-Einstein
> where nothing solid exists
> & everything is a dapple
> of points & dots & spots & blotches
>
> which while remaining isolate
> somehow manage to meld
> into a pair of levis,
> a leather jacket, boots
>
> Hey look! A red bandanna!
>
> A cosmos of polka dots
> behind, between, around which
> galactic interspace
> white-as-fresh-Crisco white.

In the third stanza, Lowland addresses the reader, exclaiming to us, hailing us in an Althusserian way, to gaze at and focus on the “red bandanna.” Though it is hard not to focus on it, even without his instruction, given the way it pops and contrasts with the blacks, whites, and grays the rest of the image portrays, his exclamation underscores the significance of this element in Kent’s art. Now, years later post-crisis, I am reading this significance as a poignantly haunting harbinger announcing the then soon approaching plague.

In addition to the use of exclamation to make this point, the poem’s structure also brings our attention to the red bandana. This red bandana stanza stands out in that it is the only one that is a single line. It cuts across the poem, a literal and metaphorical line splitting apart what

happens before and what happens after. The first, second, and fourth stanzas together make a relatively comprehensible single sentence, but this third stanza interrupts it—it cuts across the time and space evoked by the words: "universe," "post-Einstein," "remaining," "meld," "cosmos," "galactic," "interspace," and, of course, the preposition pile-up in line 12 "behind, between, around which." This cutting-across jars the reader, reminding us of the precariousness of time and space. It also does not let the reader forget that at the center of the poem is sex—sex appeal, sexual desire, and a very particular kind of sex: fisting. The last line evokes fisting by referencing Crisco. This evocation would have been familiar to at least to the gay leather community audience at this time because Crisco was used as a cheap, abundant, and safe lubricant at the sex clubs and BDSM dungeons. Fist-fucking, as a central element of the poem, like it is in Kent's art as well, serves as yet another harbinger. During the AIDS crisis many gay men turned to fist fucking as an alternative to penetrating an anus with a penis—fisting was simply a safer form of sex.

Thus, especially read together, Kent's image and Lowland's verse center both the color red and fisting. It was mere months before the crisis had been identified that these art pieces were distributed. When I realized this proximity while sitting in the basement of the archive gazing and reading, I felt a great sadness—a sorrow because I knew the plague was soon approaching them. It hit me then that archives allow for a special kind of knowing. A knowing not just about the past but also about the unknown future. There is something special about archives and the objects they hold that in some way rearranges time and exposes temporal disorder. Archives have the power to illustrate how the exchange of knowledge is not always linear or forward moving, and this speaks to how there can be slips in chronology. While researching in the archive and glossing the Kent/ Lowland art, I experienced a kind of disassociation with time,

what can be referred to as an anti-chrononormative experience. Elizabeth Freeman describes chrononormativity as:

> a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts. Schedules, calendars, time zones, and even wrist watches inculcate what the sociologist Evitar Zerubavel calls 'hidden rhythms,' forms of temporal experience that seem natural to those whom they privilege. Manipulations of time convert historically specific regimes of asymmetrical power into seemingly ordinary bodily tempos and routines, which in turn organize the value and meaning of time. (3)

In a sense, then, the archive, the objects I found there, and the way they queered time allowed me and the way I process knowledge to be reorganized in a fashion that does not align with conventional knowings of chronology. This was both uncanny and pleasurable because it opened a space for me to connect to the objects and the narratives and the histories they tell at a more intimate level.

In doing so, the Kent/ Lowland pamphlet object I discovered at IHLIA taught me a lesson about what was in their immediate future and about today's not so distant past. These men and the leather community and gay communities more broadly of which they were part had no idea the years of scorn, suffering, and death so near in front of them. Sadly, it was right around the corner. That unknowing was part of why I felt such a sadness when first realizing their art was created and distributed prior to the epidemic. The complete lack of knowledge about transmission and care during the first decade and a half was cause for so much suffering. The lack of knowledge also spoke to how the AIDS crisis was a kind of prism that made ever more transparent a slew of cultural and social ills: homophobia, sex panic, racism, classism, the list

goes on and on. Researching and learning about the AIDS crisis is an absolutely essential way to know about how these problems and prejudices interlock, overlap, and reinforce each other. Studying the epidemic is a kind of key. Though I don't think it alone unlocks the answers to resolve issues around intolerance and inequity, I do know it illustrates the ways fighting against prejudice, homophobia, and racism cannot be separated.

As I experienced this lightbulb moment—and because I was immediately drawn to and so curious about what else these men created—I dug more into their work. One of the archivists—thank you again to Jasper Wiedman—was very kind to point me in the direction and even generously gift me a copy of *Amsterdam in je Kontzak: enn Homo-Stadsgids* (*Amsterdam in Your Back Pocket: A Gay City Guide*)—see figure 11.

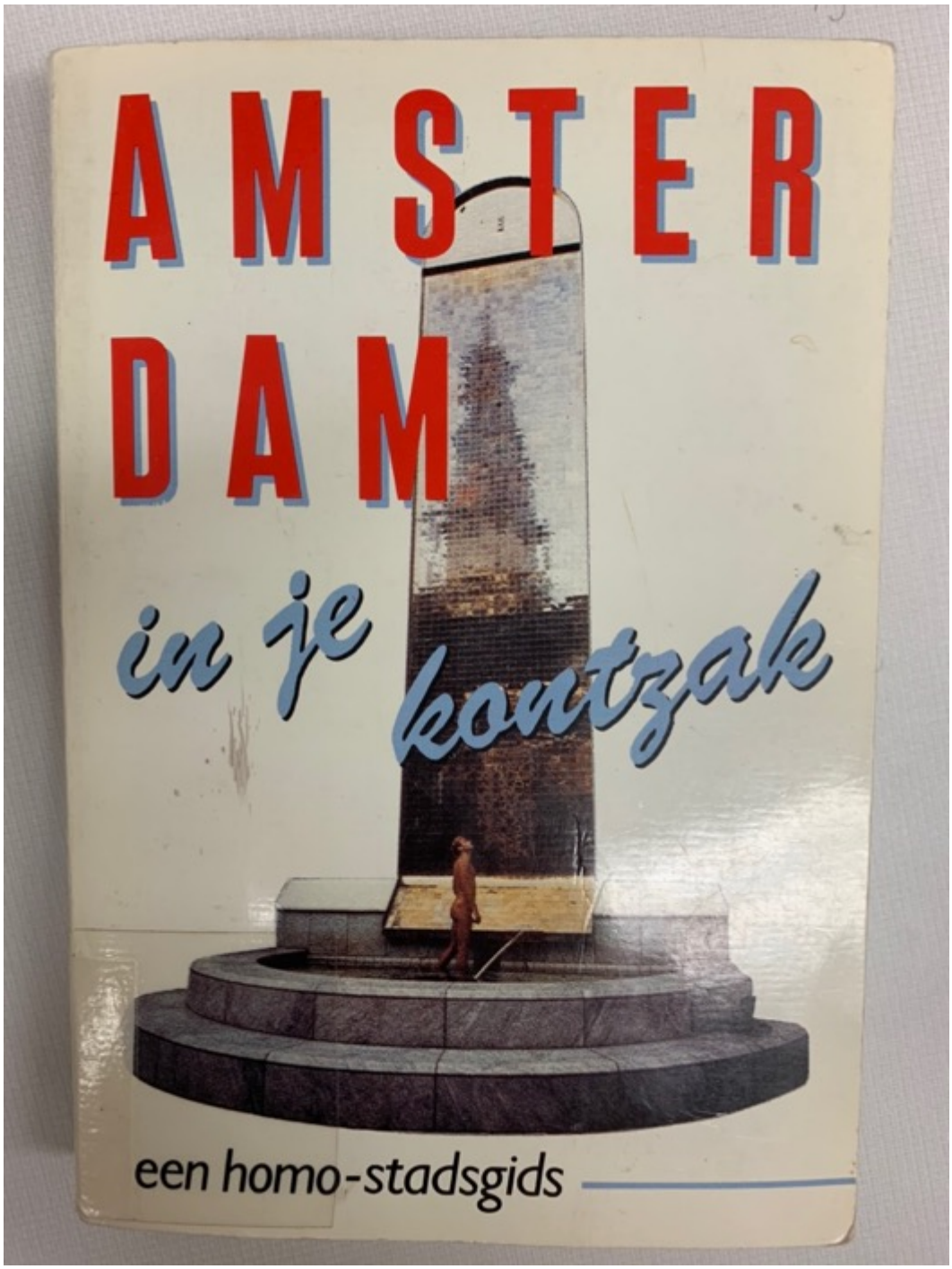


Figure 11:
Front cover of *Amsterdam in je Kontzak: enn Homo-Stadsgids* (*Amsterdam in Your Back Pocket: A Gay City Guide*)

This booklet served as both a gay guide to Amsterdam—pointing to gay clubs, coffee shops, and local events—and also as a venue for short pieces of literature and other artwork made by queer folks for queer audiences. The 1985 edition holds the short story "Een Lange Nacht in Leerland" ("A Long Night in Leatherland") by Lowland[19] with accompanying photographs by Leo Spekreijse—see figures 12, 13, and 14.

[19] Many thanks and credit given to *The Leather History.eu Foundation* for the English translation of this Lowland's text from this volume.

Figure 12:
Jacob Lowland's "Een Lange Nacht in Leerland"
("A Long Night in Leatherland") published in *Amsterdam in je Kontzak: enn Homo-Stadsgids* (*Amsterdam in Your Back Pocket: A Gay City Guide*). Photograph by Leo Spekreijse.

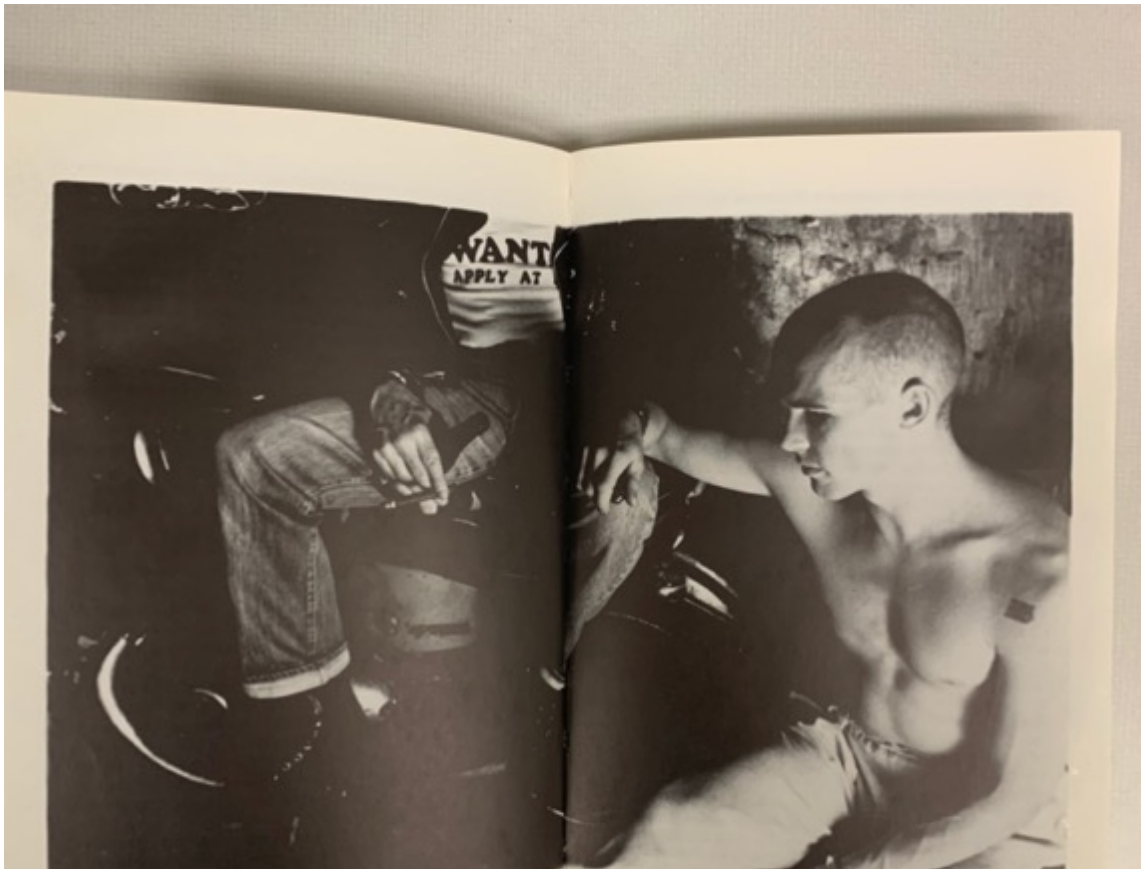
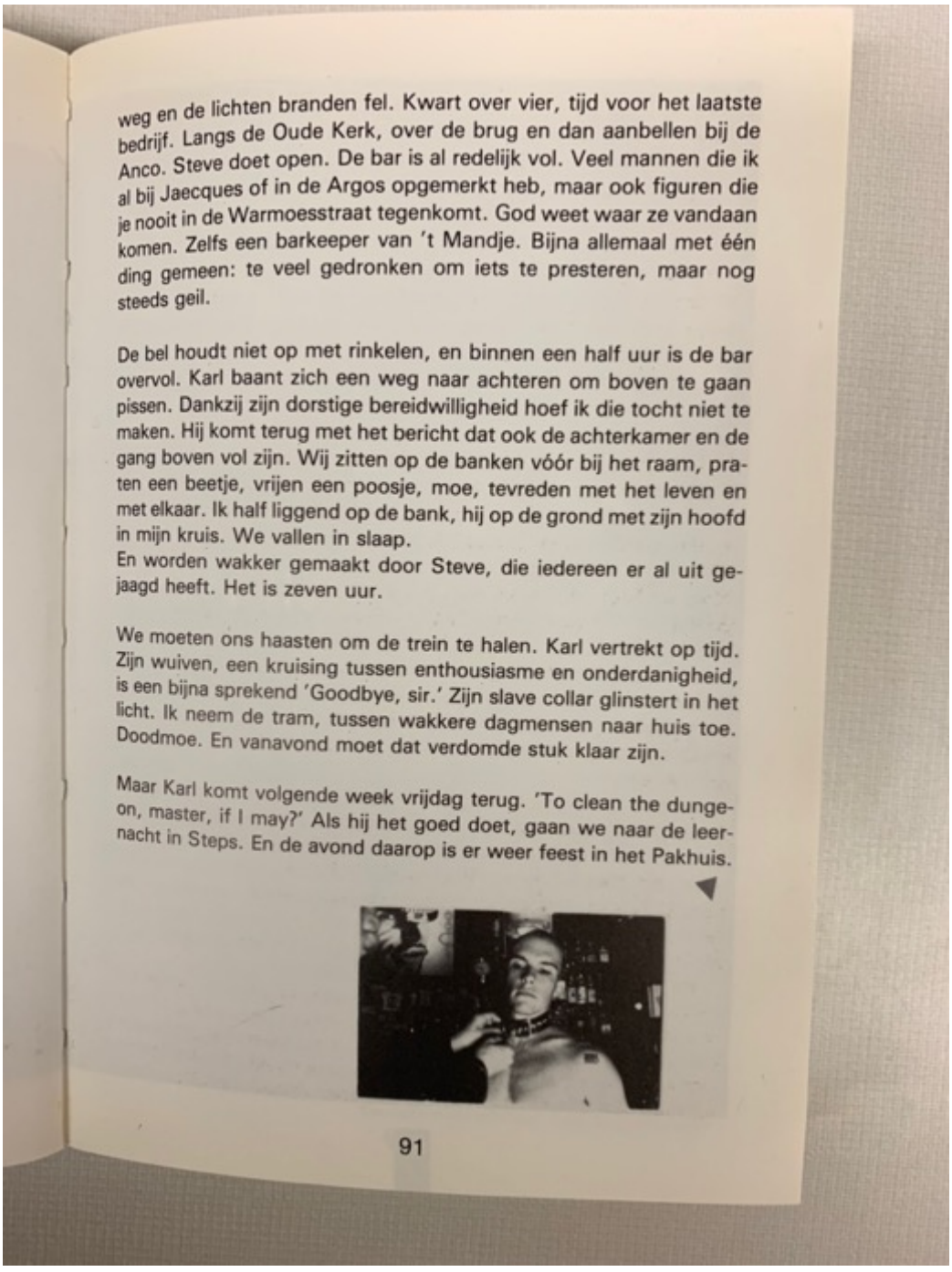


Figure 13:
Centerfold image in Jacob Lowland's "Een Lange Nacht in Leerland"
("A Long Night in Leatherland"). Photograph by Leo Spekreijse.



weg en de lichten branden fel. Kwart over vier, tijd voor het laatste bedrijf. Langs de Oude Kerk, over de brug en dan aanbellen bij de Anco. Steve doet open. De bar is al redelijk vol. Veel mannen die ik al bij Jaecques of in de Argos opgemerkt heb, maar ook figuren die je nooit in de Warmoesstraat tegenkomt. God weet waar ze vandaan komen. Zelfs een barkeeper van 't Mandje. Bijna allemaal met één ding gemeen: te veel gedronken om iets te presteren, maar nog steeds geil.

De bel houdt niet op met rinkelen, en binnen een half uur is de bar overvol. Karl baant zich een weg naar achteren om boven te gaan pissen. Dankzij zijn dorstige bereidwilligheid hoef ik die tocht niet te maken. Hij komt terug met het bericht dat ook de achterkamer en de gang boven vol zijn. Wij zitten op de banken vóór bij het raam, praten een beetje, vrijen een poosje, moe, tevreden met het leven en met elkaar. Ik half liggend op de bank, hij op de grond met zijn hoofd in mijn kruis. We vallen in slaap.
En worden wakker gemaakt door Steve, die iedereen er al uit gejaagd heeft. Het is zeven uur.

We moeten ons haasten om de trein te halen. Karl vertrekt op tijd. Zijn wuiven, een kruising tussen enthousiasme en onderdanigheid, is een bijna sprekend 'Goodbye, sir.' Zijn slave collar glinstert in het licht. Ik neem de tram, tussen wakkere dagmensen naar huis toe. Doodmoe. En vanavond moet dat verdomde stuk klaar zijn.

Maar Karl komt volgende week vrijdag terug. 'To clean the dungeon, master, if I may?' Als hij het goed doet, gaan we naar de leernacht in Steps. En de avond daarop is er weer feest in het Pakhuis.

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Figure 14:
Final page in Jacob Lowland's "Een Lange Nacht in Leerland" ("A Long Night in Leatherland"). Photograph by Leo Spekreijse.

Spekreijse's candid style photographs capture unposed subjects, documenting the daily lives of the gay men in the BDSM and leather communities in Amsterdam. The setting in which the photos are taken appear to be in bars or sex clubs. In two of them (Figures 13 and 14), the central subject is not looking at the camera, adding to the extemporaneous tone. Large sections of the phots are unlit, parts of figures are cut from or shadowed in the frame, and the camera's perspective is angled from below or above, not straight-forwardly. These artistic choices give the viewer the feeling they are present in the moment with these men. This short series of photographs—given its gritty documentary-style elements and mood—reads as part of the realism genre.

What resonates as a realistic tone in the visual texts functions as contrast to the written text; as a result, this incongruity underscores what I read as a kind of fantasy style in the writing. Lowland's vignette was written during the crisis, yet it, like his untitled red bandana poem from a few years prior, also evokes haunting qualities—not because of what it says but rather because of what it omits. Though it has been speculated that "A Long Night in Leatherland" includes aspects of memoir, the piece is a fictional short story, told in first person from the viewpoint of Jake, the gay male protagonist who implicitly identifies as a top (he is on the Sir, Master, or Dominant side of D/s slash). He's a writer living in Amsterdam, like Lowland himself. The narrative tells about a time when he shirks his writing responsibilities for a night out.

This evening out portrays a vivid picture of what that time and space was like for gay men in the leather scene in Amsterdam in the mid 1980's—it includes a stop at RoB Gallery, a chat with Rob himself, and a dalliance with an attractive bottom, a young German man he refers to as Kurt. Jake and Kurt explore the leather nightlife together, filled with Dominance and submission, fist fucking, and water sports. Lowland's compact piece, under 10 pages, concisely

tells quite a lot about what it must have been like to move around as a gay man in the leather scene in Amsterdam at this time: there was a thriving queer art scene, a close knit—though slowly declining—lively local leather community, and a fair amount of kink diversity and public places to explore fetishes.

What "A Long Night in Leatherland" does not tell, however, is anything explicit about the AIDS epidemic that had become a major crisis by this time. Rather than squarely referencing the epidemic, there are phantom-like moments when HIV/ AIDS enters, though it remains out of direct purview. It's like we can see and hear the crisis from the corner of our reading eye, but as soon as we turn toward it, it's gone. This leaves the reader wondering what exactly they saw, or didn't see. This nebulous element in the piece gives it a fantasy like quality. It describes sexual freedom and sexual fantasy, but also a fantasy world: one where AIDS was not ravaging the community and claiming so many lives.

The moment in Lowland's story when the crisis seems to be alluded to comes in about halfway. Jake is bar-hopping in hopes to find and meet Kurt, whom he had only exchanged flirtatious glances with earlier in the evening at RoB Gallery. He moves from one of his usual haunts to The Argos—this was an actual place in Amsterdam and was reportedly a major hub for queer folks and even more so for those in the leather community. Until it closed down in 2015, exactly thirty years after Lowland's piece was published, it was the oldest leather bar in Europe, a true fetish institution. It was a place for gay Leathermen to meet, cruise, and fuck. Jake explains that:

> The Argos. Things ain't what they used to be in the leatherscene, nor are they here. Nevertheless, still, if there's a place in Amsterdam which embodies the leather tradition, it must be the Argos. Further along in the Warmeosstraat,

> and then in the Heintje Hoeksteeg, one of the little alleys on the right, there the Amsterdam leatherscene was actually born. The Argos, these days, the only real grandson of the old one is considerably more spacious in size and admission policy, but there isn't much left of the almost conspiracy-like atmosphere of the little bar of the old days: that strange smell in the air of comradeship, qualified by secrecy and swank. Still, ever so present, is the air of filthiness and decay. Here you can throw your fags, spit, piss, cum on the floor, if you're pig enough for it. The limits are your only limits and the ones of the boy you are handling. It's good to be back here. (87)

This set-up of The Argos scene begs for AIDS to be explicitly addressed. Phrase choices and diction that connote loss, fear, and death, such as, "Things ain't what they used to be," "these days," "there isn't much left," "conspiracy-like atmosphere," "air of comradeship," "secrecy," "filthiness," and "decay," all allude to the epidemic. Yet despite these appeals to the HIV/ AIDS conversation, nothing of it is said outright. This collection of phrases and word choices ready the reader for a discussion about the crisis that was full blown by then, but instead the text jumps through hoops in order to avoid the discussion. AIDS is being danced around.

There are other moments in the text when the crisis is seemingly alluded to, though not expressly addressed—most of these moments are somehow connected to kink. Yes, at its most surface level this is a piece about kink, leather only being one of them, but the kinds of kinks explored by Jake and Kurt happen to be ones that involve or allow for safer sex practices, practices that many queer men at the time were adopting to decrease their chances of contracting the virus. There is no anal sex described in "A Long Night in Leatherland," let alone any bareback anal penetration, which was known by this time in most gay communities to be a type

of sex with a higher risk of HIV exposure/ transmission. Jake does, however, fist fuck Kurt, "down in the sling, my fist into the depths" (90). Again, a bit later in the night, "Karl is horny again. He wants to be in the sling again. This time about fifteen guys watch and jack off while I explore his depths, first only with one hand, the with two, three, four fingers of the other one, later on with my manhood clutched in my hand. Volcanic eruptions. And the show is over" (90-1). In this scene it is notable that as Jake and Kurt participate together in fisting, a safer sex practice, other men in the room participate in their own way via a different safer sex practice—masturbation. Together, then, the whole group is able to enjoy a kind of group sex, and it is an especially safe kind, at that.

Later in the evening, Jake and Karl partake in yet another kinky safer sex practice—watersports: "Karl tries to find a way to the back to go for a pee upstairs. Thanks to his thirsty willingness I don't have to make that journey" (91). Though at this point in the crisis each of these types of sex practices—fisting, mutual/ group masturbation, and watersports—where being promoted in many queer communities as safer alternatives to anal sex, they are not presented that way here. Rather they are simply put out there as all part of a fun night out in the leather community in Amsterdam. For me, the continual reticence throughout "A Long Night in Leatherland" to directly take on the topic of AIDS was initially surprising. The epidemic must have been on the minds of the gay male readership at the time of publication, so why not write about *why* things were not what they used to be in the leather scene? Of course, there is no way of knowing for sure why Lowland made the decision not to be direct or explicit, but the effects and affects can certainly be parsed out.

The most effective and telling outcome for me relates to fantasy. One argument Heather Love makes in *Feeling Backward* is that, " 'feeling bad' has been a crucial element of modern

queer experience" (160). It is important to note that does not shy away from this "feeling bad." In fact, she adds to her claim by explaining that there is a "hope that is achieved at the expense of the past cannot serve the future. The politics of optimism diminishes the suffering of queer historical subjects; at the same time, it blinds us to the continuities between past and present" (29). "A Long Night in Leatherland" complicates Love's arguments because, on one hand, at the time of its publication it served as an optimistic escape from that "feeling bad;" however, on the other hand, its haunting elements that allude to the AIDS epidemic serve today as a reminder of injurious histories. The way the purpose and effect of Lowland's short story has changed over time is one of its elements I find so fascinating. It illustrates how literature and art live and breathe over time. It also illuminates how precarious the line is between past, present, and future.

On its surface, "A Long Night in Leatherland" reads very much as a piece of realism—with its references to queer spaces that actually existed, the memoir-like overlaps with Lowland's life, and the vivid descriptions of BDSM dynamics that were very much practiced then and still are today. However, that realist veneer quickly polishes off as the piece almost adamantly refutes the existence of a full-scale crisis that was immediately affecting the communities the story frames. Underneath the realist surface sits a narrative of fantasy, which is underscored by the kinky tryst Jake and Kurt share: "And even later, both satisfied and content, talking, in silence and drinking, him squatted in front of me. It's as if the leathergod has drawn a magical circle around us, so far away everything seems that's happening around us" (90). The evocation of deities and magic provokes for the reader a sense of fantasy. The characterization of an ideal Dominant/submissive dynamic happening overnight also creates a romanticized fantasy. In the above quote, too, the talking about AIDS by not talking about AIDS occurs again—it's hard, impossible really, not to think about the crisis, the "everything" that was "happening,"

when reading the clause "so far away everything seems that's happening around us." But Jake and Kurt, like queers living and caring for others who were dying during this time, needed a night of fantasy away from the epidemic. They desired fantasy in the time of crisis. Reading a narrative that depicts a perfect night in a perfect leather world undoubtedly must have been the kind of escape that many gay men needed during that time. This is a night of sexual freedom during an era when the fallout from the epidemic was taking away freedoms. This is a night that the characters get to experience themselves through their desires and pleasures not via the oppressive boxes the dominant culture was putting them—and their real life counterparts—in during this time.

Not only does "A Long Night in Leatherland" deliver freedom via fantasy, so did the BDSM lifestyle the story describes. In other words, BDSM and the kinksters practicing it in Amsterdam during the late 20th century and still today all over the world illustrate the liberating power of deviant, perverted sex, desire, and pleasure—this is a power that can alleviate sexual anxiety, build community, facilitate meaningful connections, and even engender acceptance of oneself. Activism is the act of bringing about social change; given this, then, BDSM is a form of social *and* personal activism. I mean to spotlight this perspective of BDSM not to promote or idealize aberrant sexual practices, but rather to shed light on how erotic desires and pleasure have the potential to activate positive acceptance and transformation of ourselves and of our worlds. This is the power I see being illustrated in Kent's and Lowland's works. It is also a power I see as an important and undervalued framework to being and becoming; in other words, desire and pleasure—including perverse ones—are a crucial support-structure to subjectivity, to the experience of oneself as a subject. The men portrayed in the visual and written art I have glossed in this chapter illustrate how people defined themselves by what they wanted and by what they

enjoyed, not by the label of being a gay man during the AIDS crisis. This illustration is transferable beyond that time and context. It shows that desire and pleasure are a viable entryway into how subjects can experience and define themselves.

During this journey of mine, I found another power desire and pleasure hold. When I paused at the intersection of BDSM and AIDS in Amsterdam, I found eerie slips in time and reality. When I visited the IHLIA archive in Amsterdam, I found ghosts of queer past that told me lessons about today. The AIDS epidemic is by no means over, though thankfully its height in the western world has come to a close. However, many queers and queer communities are still experiencing a kind of phantom limb syndrome. The epidemic almost wiped out an entire generation of gay men; however, the individuals who died and the artistic, political, and personal work they did still cause sensations to those of us who remain today.

I am grateful to experience those phantom sensations. Without those feelings from the past, the radical parts of queerness would have died with the individuals who were lost. Having spent time at IHLIA and especially with Kent's and Lowland's works, I now see that BDSM is not only an important part in understanding Amsterdam's past and present relationship with sex but also with AIDS. The AIDS crisis was absolutely terrifying. People were afraid of the stigma, of friends and loved ones dying, and of dying themselves. It was a time when people craved feeling safe and kept from harm. It was a time when escape and fantasy was needed by so many in Amsterdam and everywhere, it was a mode of survival, and for some BDSM facilitated that safe space and imaginative diversion. Art objects like Kent's and Lowland's not only materialize the power of erotic desire and bodily pleasure to open new avenues of experiencing subjectivity, but they also bring to shape the protective power of sex/uality. The hauntings of our past can truly safeguard us.

Teaching to & Learning from AIDS Literature & Art

As I close this chapter, as I close this dissertation, I reflect on what the AIDS literature and art achieve has to learn from the materials, objects, and geographical spaces that have investigated in this chapter and in my project overall. This chapter threads together the central lessons and themes I have explored throughout this project on AIDS literature—subject formation, identity, sexuality, desire, and pleasure.

Like in my first chapter that looks at visual art by David Wojnarowicz, this chapter explores the role of visuals in the AIDS art archive by way of Nigel Kent's drawings. Visual media has been used as a crucial mode of protest—thinking here of the works by the Gran Fury art collective or the way ACT UP employed controversial art to change both minds and legislation or even the AIDS quilt and the way it materialized and made more public the reality of how many people were dying of the disease. Visual art has also played an important role in sharing the experiences of the AIDS community. It makes the private public. Wojnarowicz's and Kent's art illustrates both of these aspects that are so vital when thinking about the AIDS art archive. Their works are political. Wojnarowicz exposed state-sanctioned prejudices against queers and folks who were HIV positive, whereas Kent unapologetically illustrated gay desire, promoting radical lifestyles that went against conservative politics. Importantly, both of these artists created works that were raw and palpable—brining their experiences to their audiences in honest, candid, and moving ways. This kind of sharing of experience is an essential element of AIDS art. It's evocative—it brings feeling to the audience, and this effort was especially vital during a time when there was such a prevalent and predominant lack of compassion for queer and AIDS communities. The objects they created teach AIDS art how the political and emotional charge in art can make change.

This last chapter also carries through the role and power of erotic transgressions from the second chapter, which considers how Delany's *The Mad Man* illustrates how contract relationality can be a mode of divesting from identity. Lowland, Kent, and Delany teach AIDS literature that it does not have to be solely invested in identity. AIDS literature can be invested in desire, sexuality, and human connection. This is an investment queers from our past paid into and we benefit from today.

I have Grover's *North Enough* to thank for teaching me about the power of witnessing and of memoir. In a circuitous way, I return to those lessons here in my last chapter. Like Lowland, I am an American who went to Amsterdam to find something, or maybe better put, to witness something and thus to become someone I had not been before. I went to place myself in a space where I could witness sex and desire from a different perspective. Though Amsterdam may not be the epicenter of sexual freedom, it is situated in a larger network of sex cities. As one of those spaces, it was the place I discovered my intervention in the field of AIDS literature. This genre is an essential place to travel to for a model of how subject formation occurs and how it can be refashioned in revolutionary, personal, and novel ways. AIDS literature is an indispensable space to enter in order to unlock radically queer modes of subject construction.

Finally, I want to return for a moment back to activism, because the process of writing and revising this chapter and reflecting back on what AIDS literature teaches us and what it has taught me, I have discovered a certain potential housed in an activism centered around personal desire and pleasure. The kind of activism I have outlined in this chapter—an activism built from and around erotic desire and bodily pleasure—can help eliminate the toxic parts of queerness and sexuality: shame, internalized homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, kink guilt and shaming, inhibiting labels, and stifling identity categories. When these toxins are removed, what remains is

a deeply sexual subject. In other words, once those toxins are eradicated from our psyches and our communities—by way of a personal activism—we can realize and experience the potential of our bodies, our pleasures, our desires, our sexualities, and the sex acts we take delight in. This potential is empowering, it's sexy, it's a kind of queer prospect, and it is most certainly a seductive potential. Maybe that means that the way we come to be—the ways in which we are formed as subjects—is not so crucial to figure out after all. Maybe it means we simply take gratification in what we desire and how we experience it.

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