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Pleasure in the Past: Queer Nostalgia in the Gay American Century

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for my sister Amy, who showed me I could
my mom, who gave me the tools
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INTRODUCTION

Pleasure in the Past: Queer Nostalgia in the Gay American Century

In his part-memoir, part-ethnography, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999), the science fiction writer Samuel Delany inhabits a queer mode of nostalgia as he longs for the specific, the local, the particular, and other reparative modes of dwelling in a certain past. Across the first narrative section and the second theoretical section of the book, Delany recalls the sights and sounds awaiting those who visited the porn theatres in Times Square before 1995, when corporations began moving in and shutting down the smaller sex-related businesses. Whatever Delany poses as an unquestionable good of urban life exists in a past he cannot access, writing as he is from the vantage point of the late 1990s. He uses the word "pleasant" to describe the kinds of brief encounters and longer relationships that urban life historically offered—relationships of spontaneous contact rather than strategic networking, which can be brief, are usually face-to-face rather than mediated by telephone or internet, often cut across class and racial boundaries, and occur in public spaces. These public spaces are "humane and functional" rather than sentimental, romantic, or luxurious (90). The unplanned nature of this interaction—indeed, the unplanned nature of Times Square during these years—holds significant appeal for Delany. In *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, he locates a queer utopia in this past and evokes nostalgic memories of a space and time in which he and others were able to access a structure of humane, functional, and personal interaction.

In one revealing anecdote, Delany recalls the period when the Hale-Bopp Comet was visible from earth (1996-97). Narrating the events of a night when, in the company of strangers, he happened to observe the famous comet while walking down the street, he explains how, later,

"pleasantness [hung …] under the trees and by the brownstone stoops near which [the event] occurred, months after [the comet had] ellipsed the sun and soared again into solar night. That fallout will remain as long as I remain comfortable living here" (183). This strongly positive memory, which he offers as an example of the pleasure of urban living in a place where public sex culture is vibrant, active, and encouraged, is ultimately a nostalgic memory. He describes how the place (a New York streetcorner), its objects (brownstones and trees), and the people who inhabit it (a straight couple, a police officer, and a Hispanic man) are bathed in the light of the comet. We get the sense that the next time Delany walked past that corner, the vision of that night sprung to his mind, recalling an experience during which he felt particularly attached to the place he lived and the other people who shared that space. In his descriptions of New York between 1960 and 1995, particularly its porn theatres and public sex cultures, Delany evidences strong nostalgic feeling, even as, importantly, he asserts that he does not feel nostalgic. Nostalgia, for Delany, requires a unifying origin story, rejects both facts and questions, and is therefore morally suspect, especially for gay people. This dissertation begins with this animating paradox—Delany feels and writes from a place of nostalgia, but he rejects the emotion—and takes this paradox as a starting place for an exploration of the neglected potential of nostalgia.

"The polemical passion [of *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*] is forward-looking, not nostalgic, however respectful it is of a past we may find useful for grounding future possibilities," Delany writes, drawing a stark contrast between his own position and a nostalgically-inflected one (xvii-xviii). His distaste for nostalgia appears to have arisen because he was accused of nostalgia when he, along with others, protested the changes coming to Times Square at the end of the 1990s. Philosopher Marshall Berman proposed that what Delany and his

compatriots were nostalgic for was the gay sex trade that flourished in New York preceding the AIDS crisis (145).[1] From one angle, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* reads as an extended rebuttal of Berman's accusation. It is not just that Delany believes that Berman misunderstood his position; he is deeply offended at the thought that anyone could perceive him as nostalgic. "It is not nostalgia to ask questions," he writes, allowing us to read his declaration in the inverse as well—that nostalgia means *not* asking questions (147). Nostalgia becomes a placeholder for all that is not "forward-looking," factual, generative, and critical (xviii). Late in the book, Delany finishes relating a violent story told to him by a young hustler this way: "One would have to be *a moral imbecile* to be in any way nostalgic for this situation" (159; emphasis mine). Read alongside Berman's accusation, we can gather that, for Delany, nostalgia is unresponsive to the lived experiences of the most oppressed subjects. Further, he seems to imply that, if there are stories of violence, poverty, and injustice attending a certain historical period, that period cannot be subject to nostalgia. Critiques of nostalgia that indict the emotion as ethically irresponsible and as historically simplistic are commonplace among anti-nostalgics, queer and otherwise.

Another of Delany's critiques of nostalgia—that it "presupposes an uncritical confusion between the first, the best, and the youthful gaze […] with which we create origins"—echoes the sentiments of a number of theorists trained in and informed by poststructuralism (16). In Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Language* (1781), the philosopher argues that speech is the central, originary form of language, privileging it over written communication. Jacques Derrida, in the founding text of poststructuralism, *Of Grammatology*, translated into English in 1976, disputes the terms of Rousseau's natural/artificial, originary/false binary, in the process deconstructing the very structure of the binary. Through a complex series of analytical moves,

Derrida deconstructs the binary by which the originary is necessarily distinct from and superior to what he calls "the supplementary."[2] Following Derrida, critical theorists in Europe and the US throughout the 1970s and 1980s took up the critique of various "origins" and "origin narratives." Most importantly, two decades after Derrida, the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy decried the search for origins by pointing to the Nazis, who "embrac[ed], in a strange, grimacing alliance, both the poetico-ethnological nostalgia for an initial *mything* humanity and the wish to regenerate the old European humanity by resurrecting its most ancient myths" (46). Nancy, drawing on Derrida, makes the analytical link between the search for origins, nostalgic feeling, and political fascism.

Delany, then, is not alone in his rejection of nostalgia. Rather, in part because of the long-lasting effects of poststructuralism, his anti-nostalgic position can be taken as representative of how theorists of the last two decades have treated the emotion. Queer theorists have been particularly resistant to origin stories, a resistance out of which opposition to nostalgia arises. Two such theorists are Lauren Berlant and Jose Esteban Muñoz, whose work, like Delany's, demands that we make a choice, nostalgia *or* queer, a false choice this dissertation resists. Consider Berlant's condemnation of nostalgia as a prong of the intimate public sphere:

> Some might share with their parents a nostalgia for a time when sex practice seemed to flow naturally from the life-building hopes children are taught to have for the stable reproductive family and for wedding presents. These are the people for whom the desire for heterosexuality to make a 'comeback' actually makes some sense. To them, a 'comeback' would mean that you would not have to think about sexual preference; it would mean that only the rare and unfortunate people who have the nondominant sexuality would have to imagine it, and then keep it to themselves. (16)

For Berlant, nostalgia is one of the symptoms of the conservative appeal to tradition. To assuage their anxiety about a changing society in which all people—even privileged, white, heterosexual people—have to claim identities, political conservatives long for a past when the normative was

presumably unspoken, uncontested, and assumed. Indeed, Berlant insists, one of the projects of Reagan Republicanism was "the marketing of nostalgic images of a normal, familial America" (3). In other words, the "fantasy nation" of the intimate public sphere is a "nostalgia-based" fantasy (5). In Berlant's intimate public sphere, part of what is so unappealing about the present is the way that we are taught to feel about the past: nostalgically. Today, in the moment of Donald Trump's presidency and his nostalgic campaign slogan, "make America great again," Berlant's critique of the conservative strain of nostalgia feels particularly prescient. However, the past that conservatives invoke—one in which women were relegated to the home and queer people were invisible to or violently excluded from the social fabric—is not the *only* past for which one might feel nostalgic. While Berlant's analysis serves as an incisive critique of nostalgia as it undergirds conservative political impulses, I argue that she too hastily jettisons the theoretical potential of nostalgia in service of her broader, otherwise salient point. Nostalgia, I insist, can float free of the conservative social impulses that Berlant rightly condemns.

While he links the past to the future through what he terms the "critical affect" and methodology of hope, Muñoz dismisses nostalgia in a manner similar to Berlant, arguing that the way toward a queer future can never be through nostalgia. "Queer utopian memory" is essential for the radical queer future Muñoz imagines, but he labors to distinguish it from nostalgia, defining it as "a utopia that understands its time as reaching beyond some nostalgic past that perhaps never was" (37). In other words, nostalgia depends on illusion, and we have to push past illusion in order to access queer utopian memory. Muñoz's invocation of the "past that never was" implies that he, too, understands the emotion in its poststructuralist context, whereby it must be coexistent with the originary and the traditional. The queer past that Muñoz wants to

access through utopian memory, he underlines, is "not a nostalgic past but a past that helps us feel a certain structure of feelings, a circuit of queer belonging" (111). Nostalgia, on the other hand, for Muñoz, "foreclose[s] […] future political possibility" (38). Whatever feelings we should have about the past in order to ensure a queer future, those feelings must not be nostalgic. While it may be that, for both Berlant and Muñoz, nostalgia functions differently in different hands, implicit in these analyses is a denial of nostalgia's potential queerness or its critical capacity.

In popular cultural contexts, nostalgia has not met a more favorable fate. In 2011, the pop star Lady Gaga celebrated "gay, straight or bi, lesbian or transgendered life," maintaining that queers are "born this way," positing a uniform origin story for queer lives, no doubt in an effort to free individuals from the burden of legitimizing their existence. It is also an origin story that narrativizes time and history: What happened "then" was nothing more than preparation for what happens now and in the future. Not coincidentally, around the time that Gaga's song was released, Dan Savage declared to suicidal LGBT youth, and then kept declaring on various media platforms, that "it gets better," attempting to lock not-yet-lived queer lives into a progressivist narrative that assigns pleasure to some future date and consigns individually lived pasts to the emotional scrap-heap.[3] Whatever LGBT youth seek, they will find it in the future, where "better" is not simply a promise, but a mandate.

The relationship between *LGBT* and *queer* is not straightforward in either popular or academic contexts. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 1993 definition of queer as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be

made) to signify monolithically" was for many years the definition of record ("Queer" 8).[4] Recent scholarship and activism goes further than Sedgwick, positing *queer* as a direct refusal of the projects of LGBT mainstream politics. At the same time, as a name for a set of post-1990 theoretical practices—what Sedgwick refers to as "experimental linguistic, epistemological, representational, political adventures"—*queer* has tended to signify a broad investment in destabilizing norms of many types (8). While the chapters of this dissertation all attend to figures and moments of specifically gay history, its theoretical apparatus employs a temporal definition of queerness. To be specific, in "Pleasure in the Past," *queer* describes an anti-progressive relationship to temporality and history, a feeling of being out of step with time, among a particular set of gay male literary figures.

Informed both by popular gay culture and by queer theoretical debates in the academy, this dissertation lingers on contemporary objects of popular culture—film, television, advertising, and memoir—that reimagine the gay past positively. The large and diverse archive of texts I enlist in the service of this project evidences a nostalgic longing for that past. Against both an almost ubiquitous narrative of progress circulating in mainstream culture and competing theoretical academic models of queer temporality, I argue that this archive offers alternative approaches to gay history, approaches marked by formal and/or thematic nostalgia. As I define it, *queer nostalgia* designates, on the one hand, nostalgia's theoretical, emotional, and temporal queerness and, on the other, a subject's queer desire to transport themselves back to the beloved past in preference to the imperfect and limiting present.

Queer nostalgia, this unexpected conjunction, works in two directions. Suturing *queer* to *nostalgia* effects change on the character of nostalgia; rather than an idealized vision of a simple

past untextured by racial, class, and sexual difference, queer puts nostalgia askew, emphasizing its emotional and collective content, its parts rather than its wholes, its resonance in the present rather than its disloyalty to the past, its feeling rather than its factual failures. Suturing *nostalgia* to *queer* likewise reshapes our extant understandings of queerness. If recent queer critique has suggested that queerness has become irreparably aligned with the insidious violences of liberalism, assimilation, and progress, nostalgic queerness reroutes the concept and reasserts the potential of queerness to disrupt and unsettle, to live in the present—because it imagines the past—differently.[5] On the one hand, this dissertation asks, Why does queer scholarship so often celebrate the queer past even as queer theorists refuse to embrace nostalgia as a critical position? On the other, it asks, What might it look like to embrace nostalgia from a queer theoretical perspective, and what might be gained from such an emotional position?

Queer nostalgia is an emotion, I contend, and I use this word, along with *feeling*, throughout the dissertation. For most theorists, emotion and feeling are distinct from affect. Brian Massumi, one of the primary theorists of affect, describes emotion as "a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience […] into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning" (28). In contrast, affect is "irreducibly bodily and autonomic" (28). As Patricia Ticineto Clough explains in *The Affective Turn*, consciousness and narratability are defining contrasts between emotion and affect: "Affect constitutes a nonlinear complexity out of which the narration of conscious states such as emotion are subtracted" (2).

For Sianne Ngai, "ugly feelings" are "explicitly amoral and noncathartic, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release," and thus the distinction between emotion and affect is less useful (6). Ngai uses the words emotion, feeling,

and affect mostly interchangeably. In some cases, I argue, nostalgia can function at the level of Ngai's amoral, nonstrategic, and apolitical ugly feelings. In this key, we might imagine a purely aesthetic form of nostalgia—a rusty metal Coca-cola sign that someone buys to decorate the wall of her kitchen, for instance. While such a nostalgia might bear political meaning (and certainly bears cultural meaning), it does not gesture in any real way toward a political program. The texts of this dissertation, in contrast, speak to queer political issues, engaging the political field sometimes overtly and sometimes obliquely, but never inconsequentially.

Sara Ahmed offers a formulation of emotion that is most relevant to what I mean when I classify queer nostalgia as an emotion. Critiquing the psychological understanding of emotions as primarily private or personal, Ahmed argues that emotions create the very terms by which the social (alongside the individual, the group, the nation) is constituted (12). Emotions exist in the contact zone between object and subject, creating the borders of both. For Ahmed, the "outside-in" model of emotion, whereby an emotion exists at the level of the crowd and transfers to individuals within that crowd, fails by the same terms as the "inside-out" model, whereby emotions live inside individuals and transfer to the larger public (8-12). "In suggesting that emotions create the very effect of an inside and an outside," she clarifies, "I am not then simply claiming that emotions are psychological *and* social, individual *and* collective. My model refuses the abbreviation of the 'and.' Rather, I suggest that emotions are crucial to the very constitution of the psychic and the social as objects" (10). Instead of understanding emotions as "psychological states," she cautions, we should understand them as "social and cultural practices" (9). In the case of this dissertation, then, to speak of "queer nostalgia" is not simply to

name an emotion that circulates in queer texts; it is also to constitute, to create, the queer subject(s) who experiences nostalgia and to produce the conditions for that emotion.

While I argue that nostalgia names an emotion, however, I do not suggest that it names an uncomplicated, pure, or singular emotion. Nostalgia, like many words we use for emotional states, often names a cluster of emotions. Throughout this dissertation, specifically in its Coda, nostalgia arises out of an experience of profound loss; therefore, grief or sadness comes to characterize the feeling in a significant way. At the same time, as the dissertation's title indicates, pleasure is an important component of the emotion as well. While not necessarily always a positive emotion, nostalgia sometimes carries a positive valence. Nostalgia is ultimately about both an emotional, personal connection to the past as well as an assessment of value. The nostalgic subject feels that the past is, in some ways, preferable to the present, but knows that it is, unfortunately, lost to her in the present moment.

As it invokes the queerness of nostalgia and artifacts of nostalgic queerness, this dissertation's subtitle also invokes "the gay American century," a long twentieth century beginning with Whitman and continuing to the present, congealing especially at those historical moments that have become important to stories about the queer past: the Harlem Renaissance of racial and sexual admixture, the mid-century marked by McCarthyism and gender conformity, and the hedonistic 1970s. The gay American century I call up by my use of the phrase is neither a grand narrative of historical change nor a total account of the gay literary production of that long twentieth century. The gay American century of this dissertation is necessarily partial, idiosyncratic, fragmentary, and relational—and, importantly, literary. With nostalgia as the central thematic concern of the project, what is captured in each chapter is a literary relation

between subjects living in different historical moments—between Walt Whitman and his readers in the same-sex marriage movement of the late 1990s, between Richard Bruce Nugent and his readers responding skeptically to paranoia about the down-low at the turn of the millennium, between Truman Capote and his readers puzzling out the recent disdain for gay male effeminacy, and between Christopher Isherwood and his readers negotiating the intersection of gay and trans* communities in a global queer context. "Readers," of course, is a broad category, encompassing scholars, gay wedding website editors, independent filmmakers, journalists, book editors, television producers, advertisers, politicians, and documentarians. "Pleasure in the Past" thus offers readings of texts from an idiosyncratic, gay, long twentieth century as seen through the lens of contemporary cultural products created and consumed by an idiosyncratic, gay, contemporary public.

By invoking the category "gay," I acknowledge that this dissertation purposefully maintains an emphasis on nostalgia that arises out of gay histories in narratives written by male authors. At the same time, however, I hope my argument opens up possibilities for consideration of queer nostalgia in specifically lesbian historical and cultural contexts as well. As feminist scholars have long argued, lesbian sexuality has often been invisible to the historicist's eye in part because women's sexuality has been invisible. Because nostalgia is an affective relationship to the imagined past—a past that we often access through literary and historical representation—lesbian queer nostalgia is no doubt inherently different from, though certainly related to, gay male queer nostalgia. It is my hope that a future iteration of this project will include sections that explore, in a comparative key, lesbian *and* gay forms of queer nostalgia, accounting for both the convergences and divergences between the two.

The interdisciplinary texts that form the archive of this dissertation create and presuppose "a public," as Michael Warner defines it, one that "comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation" (66). This is a self-organized group of strangers, "constituted through […] attention" and "created by the reflexive circulation of discourse" (87; 90). Whether or not a public congealed by a shared interest in questions of gay male life remains a *counter*public in Warner's sense—a type of public that "maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status"—is an open question in the age of gay liberalism and it remains an open question in this dissertation (119). However, it is certainly the case that the concerns of these texts, despite their generic differences, indicate a public engaged in the concerns that animate them. While this is a public constituted differently than one that might be accessed through a focus on contemporary fiction, for instance, it is a public invested in questions of gay literary history—and, I argue, it is a public in which queer nostalgia circulates.

Nostalgia, A Queer Relationship to Time

Nostalgia is a queer feeling, I argue, because it names a counter-productive, counter-progressive relationship to normative temporalities of progress and evolution and to normative schedules of the individual lifespan.[6] Nostalgic feeling is, of course, not the only kind of queer relationship to the past; neither is it the definitive kind of queer relationship to the past. I am interested in reinstating nostalgia as one critically productive—no longer maligned, no longer strictly conservative—way to read queer texts. Queer writers and artists have felt and continue to feel nostalgically about the queer past; critics and theorists who ignore or dismiss this strain of queer creative energy elide nostalgia's potential. This dissertation brings the ongoing critical

conversation tracing the history and uses of nostalgia, largely ignored or misunderstood by queer theorists, to bear on questions and debates in queer theory. It is my hope that the cross-fertilization of these two conversations re-energizes both.

Although not itself a Greek word, nostalgia joins together two Greek roots—*nostos*, "the return home," and *algia*, "painful condition."[7] Johannes Hofer, a Swiss medical student, coined the term in his 1688 dissertation. For Hofer, and for the span of the two centuries after him, nostalgia was more or less synonymous with homesickness, with an "acute longing for familiar surroundings": a feeling about space, then, not necessarily about time (*OED*). Hofer and the doctors who followed his lead diagnosed this condition primarily in traveling soldiers, but also in servants living away from their home countries, students studying abroad and, as theorist Svetlana Boym writes, "various displaced people of the seventeenth century" (3). Nostalgia, then, began as a medical condition (and we are reminded here of another diagnosis that is no longer a diagnosis, homosexuality) that physicians believed they could cure with "opium, leeches, and a journey to the Swiss Alps" (Boym xiv). Failure to treat the ailment might lead to misfortunes such as "melancholia," "weeping," "anorexia," and "suicide" (Pickering 922). Peter Fritzsche proposes that it was during the mid-nineteenth century that nostalgia became a household word, loosened from its medical origins, "its general usage made tenable by the massive displacing operations of industrialization and urbanization, which also standardized its meaning as a vague, collective longing for a bygone time rather than an individual desire to return to a particular place" (1591). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, nostalgia did not accrue its current meaning—"a sentimental longing *for* or regretful memory of a period of the past" or a "sentimental imagining or evocation of a period of the past"—until later, at the turn

of the twentieth century. As late as World War II, Jackson Lears explains, nostalgia appeared in a medical guide provided by the U.S. Surgeon General, listed as a "psychophysiological complaint" that was highly contagious among groups of soldiers (59). The sociologist Fred Davis further argues that "until well into the nineteen-fifties nostalgia was regarded as a 'fancy word.' Easy and unself-conscious use of it was confined mainly to psychiatrists, academic psychologists, and relatively few cultivated lay speakers" (4-5 n.8). Other scholars, however, such as Boym, date the shift earlier, to the start of the twentieth century, concurring with the *OED*. What is revealed in the history of the word's definition is that the onset of mid-nineteenth century modernity brought about two important changes in the meaning of nostalgia. First, the word came to mean not only a longing for a familiar place from the past, but also for the past itself. Second, what began as a curable medical condition became an "incurable modern condition," an inevitable side-effect of modern life (Boym xiv).[8]

Though nostalgia's history is long, its critical history is relatively short. Except from the perspectives of physicians and psychologists, consideration of the origins and implications of nostalgia did not begin until the 1970s. In 1971, journalist Gerald Clarke draws implicitly on poststructuralist critiques prevailing at the time to write a brief and mostly unflattering explication of nostalgia in *Time*, in which he declared that "[n]ostalgia selects only what is agreeable, and even that it distorts or turns into myth" (91). Still, Clarke maintained that nostalgia could be comforting during difficult or uncertain times, and he defended it on that basis. Davis's book-length treatment of nostalgia, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, appeared a few years later in 1979. Even more than Clarke, Davis cautiously

reappraises the emotion as he tries to rescue it both from the political left, which rejects it wholesale, and the political right, which "succumb[s] abjectly to it" (x).

More recently, in 2010, one of nostalgia's defenders, British scholar Alastair Bonnett, explains that nostalgia "has for many years performed the function of a whipping post […] something that everyone agrees is both pitiable and reprehensible" (2). What are the reasons for the near-ubiquitous dismissals of nostalgia? Which of these dismissals arise from a misunderstanding of the emotion, and which might be salient critiques of its shortcomings? Berlant, Muñoz, and Delany gesture to one of the central reasons for commonplace dismissals of nostalgia, which rests on the presumption that nostalgia necessarily depends on and creates a secure origin story that elides historical complexity and varieties of experience. A survey of the critical literature on nostalgia yields a number of other reasons for the widespread disdain it has endured, many of which are based on the work of Marxist literary theorists such as Raymond Williams and Fredric Jameson—and Marx himself. Nostalgia does not fare well from a Freudian perspective, either.[9] Feminist theorists have likewise long been critical of it.[10] These theoretical histories undergird the recurring critiques of nostalgia.

First, there is the prevailing notion that nostalgia is politically conservative.[11] When Americans are nostalgic for the past, the story goes, they are nostalgic for a historical moment before the feminist movement, before the gay liberation movement, and before the Civil Rights movement. A second kind of critique of nostalgia circulates around the idea that it is a form of bad—as in incorrect, partial, or myopic—history. As a historiographic practice, it leaves much to be desired, say these critics, because by its very nature it emphasizes whatever is positive and obscures whatever is negative (by the terms of the critics' own historical moments and personal

preferences). Third, nostalgia has been criticized for its backwardness, its slowness, and its anti-modernity. In these often imperialistic and ageist appraisals of nostalgia, the feeling is associated with non-Europeans who are presumed to have some natural affinity for pre-modern or pastoral ways of life and with the elderly, who have tended not to fare well in some versions of American and European modernity.[12] A fourth group of critiques of nostalgia are aesthetic in nature. These critiques decry the unstylishness of nostalgia—"its identification to such mass cultural tendencies as surface style, stereotype, kitsch, and pastiche"—and its sentimentality, which is linked to its bad style (Pickering 924).[13] Fifth, one strain of anti-nostalgia follows Freud's explication of melancholia as failed mourning—and thus as personally, psychically, and emotionally unhealthy. I take up this strain at length in the Coda of this project.

Nostalgia's defenders have attempted to recover its critical usefulness. Their attempts have typically comprised of first arguing that nostalgia's politics are not a foregone conclusion and, second, envisioning a more capacious framework for analysis of the emotion when it appears in literary and cultural texts. Stuart Tannock suggests a series of questions we might ask when we encounter nostalgia (457-61). For what purpose is the past constructed nostalgically? Is it simply descriptive (of the past) or prescriptive (for the future)? Is it presented as an individual activity or a collective one? Does it constitute an act of retreat, an avoidance of the present, or an act of retrieval, an attempt to mine the past for future possibility? Boym, like Tannock, labors to recover nostalgia through deconstruction. She delineates and defines two types of nostalgia: "restorative" nostalgia, which "attempts a transhistorical reconstruction" of the past based on "truth and tradition" (xviii) and "reflective" nostalgia, a feeling of longing that "wistfully, ironically, desperately […] dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and

does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity," ultimately expressing her preference for the latter type (xviii). Boym's definitions indicate that, for her, nostalgia without an origin story is possible but looks very different from nostalgia that insists on one. She holds on to the poststructuralist critique of one version of nostalgia while simultaneously pointing toward the theoretical potential of another version. Her twofold position is akin to the perspective I take throughout this dissertation.

Bonnett, responding to Tannock and Boym, rejects any "instrumental approach" to nostalgia, the idea that we should be "cut[ting it] up into good and bad bits, to reassemble it in a more familiar shape, such as a tool, or a resource, whose worth is to be measured by its utility for the progressive project" (38). This cutting, Bonnett insists, "underestimate[s] the intrinsic complexity of nostalgia. To be nostalgic *is* to be dislocated, alienated, homeless, and, hence, removed from one's object of desire. For Bonnett, nostalgia is inherently reflexive: it presupposes a self-conscious relationship with history" (44). As much as I am sympathetic to the impulse against "cutting nostalgia up" into the good and bad, in the chapters that follow I argue that one of the characteristics of queer nostalgia is that it is capable of idealizing parts rather than wholes, minor retro aesthetics rather than entire stylistic movements, and small snapshots of history rather than long trajectories.

Nostalgia, A Modern Feeling

Along with Boym and other critics, I argue that nostalgia, as we know it now, is a modern invention. The modernity of the late nineteenth century brought with it massive, widespread, sudden, and sweeping changes in almost every area of human life. The ways that people

conducted their lives—from how they organized their relationships with each other to how they travelled, from how they fed themselves and their families to where they lived and with whom—were in flux. Nostalgia, which Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley type as "progress's conceptual opposite," plays an important role in any story of the historical shift to modernity (920). Tannock historicizes the emotion, writing that it "becomes a widespread, general structure of feeling only with the massive dislocations of people in the modern period. It is the distinctly modern sense of a radical separation of past from present, of people from place, and person from people that nostalgia functions to mediate, as it spins out its endless tales of return" (463). The vast social and cultural change that defines modernity enables nostalgic feeling.

We can tell two versions of the story of nostalgia's close relationship to modernity. One version is that nostalgia is an iteration of the anti-modern, a "reaction [against] the velocity and vertigo of modern temporality" (Pickering 922-3). Tannock implies something similar in the passage above when he writes that nostalgia "mediate[s]" the vicissitudes of modern time. Boym likewise outlines the relationship between modernity and nostalgia: if modernity is characterized by the privileging of individualism, nostalgia names its opposite, the "affective yearning for community and collective memory" (xiv). Whereas modernity depends on a belief in progress, nostalgia names the desire for "the slow rhythm of reflective time" (xv). Whereas modernity leads to the historical moment of globalization, nostalgia names a wish for the local, specific, and particular. When we look for rejections of or alternatives to the temporality of modernity, we may find nostalgia. Even if we extend the beginnings of modernity backward, as Fritzsche would have us do, to the French Revolution, we find nostalgia in dialectical relationship to the progressive time of modernity (1596). Before that point, prevailing notions of time and loss were

based on the Christian theology that narrates a meaningful fall and a subsequent rebirth. Following the French Revolution, this theology "gave way to a growing recognition of the ceaseless iteration of loss" and shook the faith of many regarding the ultimate meaning of that loss (1591). While Fritzsche draws a line from the French Revolution to modern nostalgia via shifts in prevailing theology, Helmut Illbruck draws a line from the Enlightenment period to modernity, which he describes as the Enlightenment's historical "heir" (24). In Illbruck's estimation, nostalgia functions in modernity as "the bad conscience of the Enlightenment […] a disease, provocation, and theoretical challenge to the Enlightenment" (18-9). In this version of the relationship between modernity and nostalgia, nostalgia is a name for some of the feelings that fail to register as sufficiently modern.

Another version of the story of nostalgia as a modern phenomenon would insist that, like anti-modernity more generally, nostalgia stands as an alternative to modernity precisely because it stands within modernity. As Lears writes, nostalgia "is entwined with the roots of the modern worldview" (59). Bonnett similarly argues that "modernity is the condition of nostalgia, it provokes and shapes it" (10). Boym, agreeing, adds that "is not necessarily opposed to modernity […] Rather it is coeval with modernity itself" (xvi). Though nostalgia is in many ways a counterpoint to the rhythm of progressive temporality on which some versions of modernity are based, it nonetheless requires modernity in order to signify as it does. Fritzsche explains that, "Well-articulated despair over the disappearance of the past combined with growing insistence on the need to work at its recollection; while the past was no longer present, it was constantly, even obsessively, represented in reflection and mourning" (1591). Fritzsche's characterization of nostalgia as, in part, a register of loss, carries through this dissertation as well. In each chapter, a

celebratory depiction of a past moment is shadowed by—because structured by—the failures of the present.

This paradoxical relationship (a rejection of modernity, within modernity), is nowhere more striking than in literary historical accounts of nostalgia and modernism. Literary historian Jeffrey Perl, asking "Is modern history […] the record of our culture's process of return?" answers affirmatively. Whether to eradicate the past or to forge a closer connection with it, he proposes, modernism can be defined precisely as a process of return. The modernist aesthetic desire to "make it new" exists in complex and tense relationship with a specifically modern notion of the past, one in which the memory and imagination of the past looms so large that it must be conquered, co-opted, or erased. Sean Scanlan, underlining Perl, writes that "even those modernist artists and critics, those make-it-new avant-gardists were nostalgic. They were nostalgic for tradition and the individual talent, they wished for social relations and architectural structures that were as simple as they were during feudalism […] Theirs was nostalgia for a time before power corrupted art, a longing for a time and place that never existed" (3). Nostalgia, then, does not accrue only around texts and authors out of step with modernist aesthetics.

Beginning with Foucault, many have argued that the homosexual, like the currently prevailing definition of nostalgia, arose alongside modernity.[14] In the second half of the twentieth century, however, various forces coalesced in the U.S. to bring about another shift in prevailing understandings of same-sex sexualities: Those who had been pathologized as inverts began to organize around the identity category "gay." In the 1950s and 1960s, as literary theorist Christopher Nealon notes, Freudian notions of inversion were replaced by notions of group coherence and pride borrowed from multiculturalism (what Nealon terms the "ethnic model" of

sexuality). This shift to the ethnic model intensified following the Stonewall Riots in 1969. Stonewall has grown mythic in gay historiography and has taken on a singular import that arguably outpaces its actual historical effects. "The origin story of gay liberation describes how on one particular night an underground bar turned into the front line of a struggle for freedom and civil rights," Heather Love writes, somewhat skeptically, invoking poststructuralist critiques of nostalgia (28). For a period of time at mid-century, the term "queer" was dormant, except when it was used as a term of approbation. It was not until the end of the century that "queer" was recuperated, first in the academy and then as an umbrella term for the ever-lengthening alphabet of the LGBTQIA community. Now, some declare queer theory dead even as popular audiences have embraced a version of queerness designed for general consumption.[15]

Meanwhile, as "queer" becomes ever more popular in mainstream cultural contexts—as a label for individual identities, groups of activist energy, certain kinds of relationships—"gay" becomes less and less popular in those same contexts. Now, it is often "gay," not queer, that bears the taint of the archaic, the passé, and the unstylishly old-fashioned. As J. Bryan Lowder explains in a recent *Slate* article that mourns the passing of certain kinds of unabashedly "gay" cultural phenomena (cruising, camp, drag) as they work their way either into anachronism or mainstream profitability, "in 2015, gayness, we are told, is over. It was a product of a darker time, and we are well freed of it. Only those suffering from nostalgia or self-hatred should miss it. Goodbye, gay—and good riddance." Beyond the fact that we might be nostalgic for queerness as it existed before the turn to identity politics, this dissertation also suggests that we might be on the cusp of yet another shift—from a nostalgia for queerness to a nostalgia for gayness. Lowder points to just such a possibility, which other scholars have likewise suggested. Guy Davidson

groups together two seemingly contradictory impulses under the label "post-gay," a label that often calls up the same kind of skepticism and doubt that "post-racial" also does. One form of "post-gay" discourse "refers to an assimilationist [stance] that declares that gays are no different from straights, apart from 'who they love' and a few missing 'rights'" (140). This form of post-gayness, while depending on stable sexual identity categories, also relies on the steady disappearance of specifically gay cultural forms. The other iteration of "post-gay" discourse is what circulates around the idea of "queer" as it exists in popular culture, whereby the notion of stable sexual identity is dismissed even as types (kinds, brands) of sexual identity proliferate under its aegis.

Nostalgia tends to coalesce around that which is abject, and this is certainly true in the case of gay and queer. In this dissertation I think through the nostalgic relationship to styles of living that have been scorned as dowdy, archaic, retrograde, or otherwise. As "queer" gains more purchase culturally, we may see the beginnings of a nostalgia for "gay," a desire to cling to the stable identities that were so hard-won in the past.

Nostalgia on Film and Television

This dissertation does not only rest on a periodizing argument about nostalgia's close ties to Western modernity, but also on a formal argument about nostalgia as it functions in contemporary visual texts—film, television, advertising, and other kinds of visual culture. Neither unambiguously nor conclusively, I suggest that careful attention to the forms of visual culture enables us to inhabit a critical position from which to theorize nostalgia's queerness and our surprising nostalgia for past queerness. The chapters that follow take as their starting points

contemporary gay films, television episodes, television advertisements, and book jacket art. They are anchored in close readings of these items of visual culture, which I put in dialogue with literary and other historical texts. The past to which these texts point nostalgically is recovered through readings of literary texts, which in their turn are reanimated through contemporary visual media. The literary here is in a privileged relation to the biographical, as the biographical is accessed specifically through a literary record comprised of Nugent's semi-autobiographical "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" (chapter two), a biography of Capote based on the recollections of his friends (chapter three), and Isherwood's memoir *Christopher and His Kind* (chapter four).

Perhaps because, as Lucas Hilderbrand points out, the cinema and the homosexual were born around the same time, film has long been used to tell queer stories, both stories that can be read queerly, and stories about gay and lesbian people (73). Any doubt of the centrality of film to gay life, culture, and art in the twentieth century would be quelled by a glance at the contents of the recently released *Cambridge Companion to American Gay and Lesbian Literature* (2015), which offers five generic chapters: one on poetry, one on fiction, one on drama, one on memoir, and one on film. I argue, in agreement with Scott Herring, the editor of the *Companion*, that film is without question one of our central gay literary genres. Film theorist B. Ruby Rich offers an alternative to the literary historical connection between queerness and film Hilderbrand proposes, preferring an affective explanation: "A desire to bear witness is still intense: the need to sit in an audience with others of one's kind for the shared experience of those stories and characters on the screen, marked by the unmistakable sensibility of a thousand kindred spirits holding their breath in the dark" (xxvii). Whether affective or historical—or, most probably, both—the standard disciplinary boundaries between film and literature dissolve in most queer scholarly

contexts. As early as 1999, Ellis Hanson notes that "film theory is already becoming a locus of lively academic debate and speculation in the field" of queer theory, culture, and literature (3). The ensuing decades have only further proven the truth of this observation.

The films that occupy my attention are not the films of the radical New Queer Cinema nor, for the most part, are they the award-winning critical darlings characteristic of recent years.[16] Rather, the films I have found most useful to think with and through as I construct a theoretical framework for queer nostalgia are those that are squarely middlebrow, often aesthetically or thematically uneven. Guided by my impulse to take seriously what has been dismissed as unserious, I am drawn to popular films such as *Infamous* (2006), the lesser-known Capote biopic that was mostly critically panned, decried as too glittery, too stylish, and too unserious in comparison with its Oscar-winning predecessor *Capote* (2005). Nonetheless, I construct my arguments with a view to the wider backward-looking turn in queer art film.

Television shares some features with film, including many of the same directors, producers, and actors. It is a newer medium relative to film, however, and until recently it has been plagued by accusations that it is an artistically compromised medium—crassly commercial, thematically simplistic, and of low artistic value. Television scholars Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine argue that the "denigration" of television is in part due to the fact that it historically been feminized (10). Because television accesses people inside their homes, it bears the taint of the domestic. In the last several years, however, television's cultural cache has been on the increase. Newman and Levine point out that this legitimization has not meant that we have dispensed with unjust hierarchical valuations completely, only that we assign value differently

now. Daytime soaps, for instance, are still viewed dubiously by high culture standards, while some prestige television offerings may be considered worthy of attention (6).

Television studies, an already growing subfield of film and media studies that has grown even more in the recent years of legitimization, draws on techniques of social scientists, critical theorists, and literary critics in order to examine not only television programs, but also "its audiences, its producers, […] its history and contexts" (Gray 22). For scholars in this subfield, television serves as "a repository for meanings and a site where cultural values are articulated" (22). My readings of *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* in chapter one and *Transparent* in chapter four are framed by this understanding of what television texts offer and enable. *Dr. Quinn*, which aired in the 1990s, represents an older television paradigm whereby audiences viewed programs as they aired rather than recorded on DVR or streamed online. *Transparent*, which is still in production and released yearly on Amazon.com, represents the new television paradigm, what Newman and Levine term "the convergence era," in which "many media come together and begin to blur into one another" (4). In both cases, the programs allow me to write about the contexts of these cultural moments.

Because television has traditionally been a conservative media, dependent on advertising revenue in an arguably more direct way than film, queer characters were uncommon until the last few decades. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, those who appeared at all were typically depicted as either villains or pitiable victims (Capsuto 7). Very few were recurring characters. Steven Capsuto argues that television shows, created and produced in large part by those sympathetic to the causes of sexual minorities, nonetheless have to "negotiate the paradoxical middle ground between tolerance and acceptance" (2). Ellen Degeneres's coming out on a famous episode of

Ellen in 1997 was the consolidation of a number of years of slowly increasing representation and more diversity within those representations. The *Dr. Quinn* episode I write about in chapter one aired in the same month, April 1997, as Degeneres's coming out.

Formally, the filmic technique that ties together many of these visual texts is flashback. Although flashback is not solely a feature of the visual media, it is a characteristic one. Flashback is an old form with literary roots, but it gained particular popularity among writers of American modernism such as John Dos Passos, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner, who were interested in the effects of narrative ordering and disordering (Bordwell). According to the film scholar David Bordwell, there are a number of reasons filmmakers (and, by extension, television directors) might use flashback: to explain a character motivation, to give information that clarifies an incident (as in the case of detective stories), or to juxtapose two moments in order to imply a comparison or a contrast. In the films and television I analyze that are structured by flashback—*Brother to Brother* in chapter two and both *Christopher and His Kind* and *Transparent* in chapter four—the device primarily serves this latter purpose, although it can aide character development as well. One of the other important services flashbacks can perform is to bring together personal and social history. Maureen Turim, in the defining study of the flashback, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History* (1989), writes, "[i]f flashbacks give us images of memory, the personal archives of the past, they also give us images of history, the shared and recorded past […] flashbacks in film often merge the two levels of remembering the past, giving large-scale social and political history the subjective mode of a single, fictional individual's remembered experience" (2). Turim's description clarifies precisely why flashbacks

serve nostalgic themes so well. Flashback form centralizes the comparative relation between the past and present and the personal connection across time that are hallmarks of queer nostalgia.

Whether structured by flashback or not, much backward-looking queer visual culture is nostalgic. Theorists of nostalgia have argued that visual form, in general, lends itself to nostalgic styles and themes. Pickering and Keightley point out that "[c]ertain media of communication and certain art forms may reach us more directly in this respect than others" (935), citing music and photography as exemplary nostalgic forms. Although they suggest that a film's music plays the largest role in its ability to inspire nostalgia, I would insist that cinematography and script are equally important, as is the communal space in which films have historically been consumed by marginalized social groups, what Rich refers to as "audience[s] with others of one's kind" (xxvii). Paul Grainge departs from Pickering and Keightley, hypothesizing that it is in fact not the aural that incites nostalgia most readily, but the visual, specifically the black and white image, whether moving or still, which he calls the "aesthetic mode of nostalgia" (3).

Reading for and with Nostalgia

Throughout this dissertation, I am concerned not only with locating queer nostalgia in visual texts and media—though that is certainly a central concern—but also with modeling what it might look like to read through nostalgia. The nostalgic reading mode lingers in the past mostly without judgment, but oscillates easily between the past and the present. It personalizes a relationship to the past, offering communion across time. At the same time, it clarifies our relationship to the present and charts the failures of our contemporary moment, enabling a form of queer mourning for what has been lost in the forward march of history. Queer nostalgia, as a

reading practice, is descriptive, relational, oscillating, and reparative. It requires attending to detail, making connections across time, and keeping one eye on the past and one on the present.

Queer nostalgic reading is a member of a family of reading practices literary theorists have developed and modeled, all in some way invested in subverting the hermeneutics of suspicion. Elizabeth Freeman's "temporal drag" allows for consideration of failed social movements, subjectivities made illegible by narratives of progress, histories rendered invisible by the presumption of teleology. Nishant Shahani's "retrospection" names the act of gazing back at "pre-Stonewall," "depressive" memories of violence and exclusion as well as alternative "reparative archive[s]" of queer memory (16). Love's reading practice, "feeling backward," rejects the optimistic progress narrative of the gay and lesbian mainstream and acknowledges the pain, abjection, regret, shame, despair, self-hatred, withdrawal, bitterness, melancholia, heartbreak, and loneliness intrinsic to queer history. Backward feelings "index […] the ruined state of the social world, […] indicate continuities between the bad gay past and the present, and […] show up the inadequacies of queer narratives of progress" (27). While Love argues that the gay past is not necessarily any worse than the gay present, my goal here is to push her intervention past its stated purposes. In addition to admitting the violences of the past and acknowledging its continued hold on queer people, I want to consider the possibility of a kind of reverse teleology: How do we explain why queer artists and writers sometimes feel that the supposedly "bad" gay past is "better"—less punishing, less programmatic—than the supposedly "good" gay present? Must those feelings be flattened by proper notions of progressing and "getting better" and at the same time dismissed by queer theorists as conservative, unsexy, or anti-historical?

As I anticipated, it is queer theorist Sedgwick's 1997 founding essay, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," that in many ways enables my emphasis on queer nostalgia. Delineating two different reading practices—paranoid reading borne out of the hermeneutics of suspicion and reparative reading borne out of the psychoanalytic depressive position—Sedgwick proposes that the latter might serve to open up new types of interpretation and, indeed, new types of relationships to texts and to history. Paranoid reading displays "a distinctively rigid relation to temporality, at once anticipatory and retroactive, averse above all to surprise" (146). Paranoid reading predicts the future and believes the past can be known. On the other hand, "because the [reparatively-positioned] reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did" (146). Throughout this dissertation, I show how queer nostalgia can make available to us reparative ("additive" and "accretive") readings of queer history (149).

Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique* (2015) draws on Sedgwick's legacy by advocating for a move away from critique as the central mode of literary critical relationship to texts. Her alternative proposal is "postcritical reading," which asks that we concentrate on what kinds of thought are enabled by a text rather than what a text lacks or insufficiently offers. At the same time, Felski rejects Sedgwick's focus on paranoia ("accusing others of paranoia looks uncannily like a paranoid move") because it pathologizes some reading practices even as it questions the wisdom of pathologization (35). To read nostalgically, as I propose, or to read for nostalgia, as I do throughout this dissertation, is not postcritical by Felski's terms. I often follow Sedgwick's diagnosing lead in working to uncover how certain progressivist readings of queer history fail to

account for the full texture of that history. However, my focus on nostalgia arises from many of the same concerns that animate Felski's study. I, too, am struck by the dominance of the literary critical party line that says, "[t]o refuse critique […] is to sink into the mire of complacency, credulity, and conservatism" (8). These are, as I have shown, criticisms often leveled against nostalgia, sometimes unfairly so. If Felski takes Sedgwick's reparative reading model in one direction, I take it in another, not necessarily abandoning critique, but remaining live to the ways in which nostalgic reading may be critical in a new way.

Chapter Overview

In each of the dissertation's chapters, I read post-Stonewall cultural texts that evidence various kinds of nostalgia for queerness—a longing for "queer" that came before "gay" in the narratives we tell about sexuality across the twentieth century, a longing for queer social and communal forms that have been supplanted by the neoliberal gay projects of the contemporary moment, and a longing for "queer" before it was institutionalized by the academy.

In chapter 1, "'Cocksucking and Democracy' in the Shadow of the Capitol: Walt Whitman and the Neoliberal Literary Imagination," I argue that the neoliberal United States, taking shape since the mid-1990s, produced a gay nationalist version of Walt Whitman around which the mainstream LGBT movement gathered in shared pride, recognition, and a progressive version of queer history. As some American gays and lesbians began to agitate for full citizenship under the law by means of access to marriage and military service, representations of Whitman and readings of his poetry began to tether his semi-secret same-sex desire to his long-celebrated nationalism. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, Whitman, once the closeted

patriot, became the gay American ur-citizen. This Whitman, I argue, elides a queer Whitman who slips out of the grip of homonormative revision but can be accessed from a nostalgically-inflected readerly position. The story of Whitman since the neoliberal 1990s thus inaugurates the dissertation by tracing the limitations of progressive anti-nostalgic narratives.

In chapter 2, "'It never really was the same': *Brother to Brother*'s Black and White and Queer Nostalgia," I read the 2004 film *Brother to Brother,* which is nostalgic for the black queer moment of 1920s New York and presents a fictionalized account of the final months of the life of the Harlem Renaissance artist and writer Richard Bruce Nugent. An anti-nostalgic reading of this film would insist that it merely substantiates the claims made by queer theorists that nostalgia is bad history and worse theory—uncomplicated, unrigorous, and sentimental. Instead, I reach beyond accusations of sentimentality and historical inaccuracy to insist that the nostalgia prevailing in *Brother to Brother* functions as an anti-racist and anti-homophobic rejoinder to paranoia about the so-called "down-low" phenomenon, which obsessed the media and the public during the early 2000s. Nugent's black queer 1920s community of artists, recollected in flashback, serves as an instructive contrast to the co-constituted homophobia and racism of the film's own moment of production.

In chapter 3, "Truman Capote's Swans: Effeminacy, Friendship, and Style in Douglas McGrath's *Infamous* (2006)," I argue that McGrath's film, which recounts Truman Capote's research travels to Kansas in the late 1950s, displays nostalgia both for mid-century gay male relationships with women and for the aesthetic styles and embodied performances of mid-century gay male effeminacy. In opposition to the effemiphobic rhetoric of many contemporary gay cultures, *Infamous* highlights Capote's effeminacy and his relationships with women as

creatively and personally productive, offering nostalgic alternatives both to the gay cultural attachment to masculinity and to powerful historical narratives about the inherent abjection of queerness at mid-century.

In chapter 4, "In the Past, Across the Ocean: Nostalgic American Dreams of 1930s Berlin," I argue for the specificity of place as essential to queer nostalgia. Reading the 2011 Christopher Isherwood biopic *Christopher and His Kind* (based on the autobiography of the same name) and the second season of Amazon Prime's successful series *Transparent*, I show how contemporary post-Stonewall nostalgia for Weimar Berlin functions as a counterpoint to today's queer culture, which has witnessed a schism between the gay and trans* communities. These two nostalgic texts long for not only the years immediately preceding Hitler's rise to power, during which the sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld coined the inclusive label "sexual intermediaries" and agitated for social justice on their behalf, but also the location of that confluence of sexual understanding and freedom, the urban space of Berlin.

In the coda, in which I read the 2005 documentary *Gay Sex in the 70s*, I show how nostalgia can be understood as a queer mode of grief that refuses the normative schedules of mourning offered by the psychoanalytic tradition descended from Freud and by more recent mental health professionals such as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. I trace the ways in which the crisis of AIDS structures our nostalgic imagination of the queer past and, looking back upon the work of this dissertation, I foreground the disease—fears of it, radical political action around it, tragic stories marked by it, homophobic mainstream reactions to it—as an implicit but vital force in each of the chapters of the dissertation.

"Pleasure in the Past: Queer Nostalgia Across the Gay American Century" reanimates nostalgia as an emotional position from which to read queer cultural history. The title signals a double valence, functioning both as an invitation to take pleasure in what the queer past offers us today and as a mandate to pay close attention to what was pleasurable for queer subjects who lived in the past. Against the widely accepted criticisms of the emotion, which indict it as politically conservative, historically incorrect, aesthetically unsophisticated, retrograde, sentimental, and immature, this dissertation recovers nostalgia, showing how multifarious, complex, and rich the emotion can be. Our nostalgia for Whitman, Nugent, Capote, and Isherwood—and for their historical moments—performs vital queer work as we negotiate pressing issues of sexuality, race, gender, authorship, nationhood, and history.

[1] See Berman, 15-17, 81-82.

[2] See Derrida, 302-316.

[3] Savage was later joined by celebrities, such as the actors who play the married gay couple on ABC's *Modern Family* and the financial advisor Suze Orman, and by politicians, such as President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden, who all made "It Gets Better" videos that Savage posted online. Selected videos were transcribed and collected in a printed volume that was released in 2011.

[4] Since Sedgwick, this definition has been productively complicated by new strains of queer scholarship, particularly queer of color critique. See especially Puar, Eng, Muñoz, and Ferguson.

[5] David Eng argues that radical critiques of capitalism and the family are largely inaccessible to us in the present, a present that offers only the dystopia of state-sponsored citizenship by way of facile multi-cultural inclusion policies, "mass-mediated queer consumer lifestyle," and "juridical protections for gay and lesbian rights" (3). Like Eng, Jasbir Puar links the homonormative gay citizen to the neoliberal projects of nationalism. Homonationalism, a post-9/11 development, thus names the way that "certain homosexual constituencies have embraced U.S. nationalist agendas and have also been embraced by nationalist agendas," particularly imperialism (xxiv).

[6] In referring to normative life schedules, I am drawing on J. Jack Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005). Halberstam defines queerness as a rejection of normative values of stability, longevity, and security. Queerness, by the terms of Halberstam's argument, is the embrace of risk, spontaneity, and immediacy.

[7] For a history of the origins of nostalgia, see Boym and Illbruck.

[8] Some doctors and psychologists have revived their interest in nostalgia as a medical condition. Researchers in the U.K. recently conducted a series of tests, the results of which show that nostalgia can have positive mental benefits, making patients more resilient, well-adjusted, and less anxious and bored. Nostalgia, this study shows, may foster deeper connections between patients and their loved ones. The researchers conclude that it is safe—indeed, even advantageous—to indulge in nostalgia between two and three times per week. (See Tierney, D1.)

[9] See Natali for further discussion of nostalgia in Marx, Williams, Jameson, and Freud.

[10] Janice Doane and Devon Hodges's *Nostalgia and Sexual Difference: The Resistance to Contemporary Feminism* is exemplary of feminist anti-nostalgic criticism. They argue that nostalgia is the name for "a frightening anti-feminist impulse," which is marked by "a retreat to the past in face of what a number of writers—most of them male—perceive to be the degeneracy of American culture brought about by the rise of feminist authority" (xiii). Another example in this critical vein is Gayle Greene's "Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory," against which Stuart Tannock argues that nostalgia and feminism are not necessarily opposed to each other.

[11] Lears points out that conservatives, too, have used nostalgia as a whipping post, accusing Marxists of nostalgia for pastoral farm life (60).

[12] See Bonnett, 25-30.

[13] Each critic I cite here discusses sentimentality to some extent, but for further reading see especially Tannock, 454-5; Fritzsche, 1595; and Lears, 59-60.

[14] Critics of early modern and nineteenth-century literature and culture have revealed the complicated richness of same-sexualities and versions of what we might call queer communities long before the beginnings of late nineteenth century modernity. In other words, it would be a presentist simplification to presume that the moderns invented all the forms of style and sociality that we associate with homosexuality, even if the homosexual himself is a modern invention. Nevertheless, in part due to Foucault's famous pronouncement that, by the late nineteenth century "homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality […] The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species," 1890 has become a conventional starting mark for the process of crystallization of gay identity underway throughout most of the rest of the twentieth century (43). In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Sedgwick, too, homed in on the year 1891 as the culmination of "a particular historical moment […] from the very midst of the process from which a modern homosexual identity and a modern problematic of sexual orientation could be said to date" (91).

[15] Symptomatic of the growing anxiety that queer theory is over, a 2011 collection edited by Janet Halley and Andrew Parker begins with the question, "What has queer theory become now that it has a past?"

[16] In the most widely-accepted history of gay and queer film, there are three phases of film production. The first spans from the Stonewall Riots in 1969 through the late 1980s and early 1990s and is populated both by nonfiction films, often gay-affirmative, and by fiction films, in which gay and lesbian characters are punished for their sexual transgressions by story's end. The second phase is marked by the rise of the New Queer Cinema, so named by B. Ruby Rich in 1992, a style and politics of film-making that grew out of queer filmmakers' engagement in AIDS activism, the development of the new academic field of queer theory, relatively low rent prices in large cities like New York and San Francisco, and the affordability of personal camcorders (xvi). By the early 2000s, when the third phase of queer cinema began, many radical filmmakers had turned their attention to what Rich refers to, following the *New York Times* film critic Stephen Holden, as "Giddy Gay Lite": "a disparaged pseudo-genre packed full of cheesecake gay male romances and chocolate-box lesbian confections" (xxiii). During these years, the gay and lesbian presence swelled on television, the pressures of AIDS lightened somewhat with the advent of new drugs available to most Americans, and the march toward homonormativity began (263; 261). Nearer to our own historical moment, serious and artistically sophisticated films, some award-winning and with crossover appeal to straight audiences, proliferated.

CHAPTER ONE

"Cocksucking and Democracy" in the Shadow of the Capitol: Walt Whitman and the Neoliberal Literary Imagination

There is a poem by Walt Whitman, first published as a section of the *Calamus* sequence of the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*, in which the speaker narrates monogamous same-sex coupledom in the shadow of the capitol. By the 1867 edition, Whitman had titled the poem, "When I Heard at the Close of the Day." Critics have called it "one of the most beautiful love poems in English," "one of the finest love poems in all of American literature," not to mention "among the best known," "most complex and moving," "most contented poem Whitman ever wrote," "skillful, candid, and tender—with Whitman at his happiest."[1] Today, in addition to its distinction as a representative articulation of Whitman's philosophy of male/male "adhesive" love, the poem circulates in popular culture as a wedding poem—specifically, a gay wedding poem.[2]

> When I heard at the close of the day how my name had been received with plaudits in the capitol, still it was not a happy night for me that followed;
> And else, when I caroused, or when my plans were accomplished, still I was not happy;
> But the day when I rose at dawn from the bed of perfect health, refreshed, singing, inhaling the ripe breath of autumn,
> When I saw the full moon in the west grow pale and disappear in the morning light,
> When I wandered alone over the beach, and, undressing, bathed, laughing with the cool waters, and saw the sun rise,
> And when I thought how my dear friend, my lover, was on his way coming, O then I was happy;
> O then each breath tasted sweeter—and all that day my food nourished me more—And the beautiful day passed well,
> And the next came with equal joy—And with the next, at evening, came my friend;
> And that night, while all was still, I heard the waters roll slowly continually up the shores,

> I heard the hissing rustle of the liquid and sands, as directed to me, whispering, to congratulate me,
> For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool night,
> In the stillness, in the autumn moonbeams, his face was inclined toward me,
> And his arm lay lightly around my breast—And that night I was happy. (*Leaves* 105)[3]

This poem's appeal as a contemporary wedding reading for gay couples is no doubt rooted in the poem's geography, which can be mapped by the neoliberal assumptions that undergird various contemporary legal battles for gay and lesbian equality, same-sex marriage among them. In recent years, one of the many projects of neoliberalism has been to incorporate gender-conforming, white, wealthy gays and lesbians into the institutions of American democracy, such as marriage. I argue that the democratic vision of this poem both aligns with and points toward precisely that gay neoliberal political program.[4] The poem's speaker moves between the capitol building—presumably a noisy space in a densely-populated urban area—and the beach, where he stays by himself, awaiting the return of his lover. Because the first two lines are followed by the important conjunction "But," which marks the move into the poem's argument proper, the speaker's "carous[ing]" and his "accomplished" "plans" (line 1) seem to be taking place in the urban space in and around the capitol (line 2).[5] Given the symbolism of the capitol, the carousing and accomplishments are tied to citizenship and national identity.[6] The main section of "When I Heard at the Close of the Day," however, takes place on the beach, where the speaker sleeps, bathes, rests, eats, and listens to the sounds of the natural world. This peaceful (implicitly private) setting, in contrast to the capitol but within view of it, does not feel noisy, crowded, or urban. At the word "But," readers are directed away from the noise and activity of the capitol, yet the symbol of the nation state never disappears fully from view: It hovers over the poem as the capitol hovers over the speaker's temporary beachside home. The

capitol figures so strongly in this poem no doubt because a capitol is an odd beginning setting for a love poem, particularly a love poem that quickly moves to another setting and remains there.[7] In his emphasis on this starting place for the poem, Whitman is at pains to draw both a distinction between and a connection joining the space of the couple and the space of the state. The poem's reader might be guided to the quiet beach and invited into a private moment, but it is impossible to ignore the capitol building looming in the distance. Indeed, the geography of this poem—a man waits patiently, by himself, in the permissive but surveilling shadow of state power, for his monogamous male lover's return—is the geography of same-sex marriage. In the simultaneous disjunction and yoking together of these two opposing types of setting—the public space of parties and accomplishments on the one hand and the private beach where the speaker communes with the natural world on the other—Whitman seems to be opening up questions about public and private, national and personal, that we debate now around the issue of marriage equality.

Keeping in mind the poem's appearance on a number of gay wedding websites, I have been highlighting why it might appeal as a poem about marriage. This thematic emphasis on marriage comes to the fore in a line toward the end of the poem, where the speaker describes hearing the "rustle of the liquid and sands," imagining that they are "whispering, to congratulate" him. Potentially, the whispered congratulations are for his accomplishments (or, indeed, for the happiness he eventually finds after his lover's return), but probably not, since the next line specifies that the congratulations are "For"—as in "Because"—"the one [he loves] most lay sleeping by [him]." It is as if the relationship itself warrants congratulations and as if simply by his participation in this couple, he has earned a measure of praise. The praise is "whisper[ed],"

however, perhaps implying discretion, even self-protective secrecy, about the relationship. Reflecting on the whispered congratulations for the speaker's romantic life, the reader is drawn back to the opening lines, which describe high-volume congratulations for the speaker's professional accomplishments. In the contrast between the quiet, private wedding reception hosted by the sand and water and the positive public reviews heard across a great distance, we uncover another likely reason for the poem's popularity among gay couples getting married in the contemporary moment: Whitman presciently and optimistically imagines the romantic union of two men being met with congratulations at the same time as he admits the limited, "whispered" way those congratulations are offered in his historical moment, all the while idealizing the political geography that he believes will enable a future where this relationship, in addition to being celebrated by the natural world, is celebrated (like professional accomplishments) by "plaudits in the capitol."

The geography of "When I Heard at the Close of Day" shares much in common with the Supreme Court's ideological map in *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003), which (among other things) upheld the right of privacy for same-sex couples engaging in consensual sex acts. David Eng, writing about the *Lawrence* decision, could just as easily be writing about Whitman's poem: "From another perspective we might say that [it] not only inducts gays and lesbians into the *time* of liberal progress but also places them into the *space* of the liberal nation-state" (43; emphasis original). Though this case's particulars have been rehearsed and re-rehearsed, I provide a short summary of the incident that instigated the case. Police outside Houston responded to the home of John Geddes Lawrence after receiving a call reporting a "weapons disturbance" (*Lawrence* 508). What they found instead was Lawrence having anal intercourse with another man, Tyron

Garner. Lawrence was older and white while Garner was younger and black, and they were not boyfriends, but the court's decision omits these details. The police arrested Lawrence and Garner, who were tried and convicted under Texas's anti-sodomy statute, which made it illegal to have anal sex, whether consensual or not, with a partner of the same sex. The men were fined $200 each, but they appealed. The U.S. Supreme Court heard the case in 2003, with a decision in favor of Lawrence and Garner. In the majority decision, Justice Kennedy writes, "Liberty protects the person from unwarranted government intrusions into a dwelling or other private places. In our tradition the State is not omnipresent in the home. And there are other spheres of our lives and existence, outside the home, where the State should not be a dominant presence" (515). Both Whitman's poem and the court decision are paradoxical in that they offer scenarios whereby the state protects (some forms of) gay male sexuality against intrusions by the state.

I cite *Lawrence* here rather than *Hollingsworth v. Perry* (2013), the court's same-sex marriage case, because *Lawrence* renders overt the geography of the public/private binary both in the retelling of the incident that led to the case and in the eventual decision.[8] A detail that proved important in the case was that the police, agents of the state, entered a private home and subsequently meted out punishment for actions taking place inside. Moreover, one of the ways *Lawrence* has been popularly historicized (too readily, not complexly enough) by mainstream gay marriage advocates is as a precursor to *Hollingsworth*, which struck down California's same sex marriage ban, and as a successor of *Loving v. Virginia* (1967), which struck down anti-miscegenation laws barring mixed-race couples from marrying.[9] In this narrative, if *Lawrence* precluded the government from breaching privacy to punitive ends, *Hollingsworth* enabled the government to offer protection in the form of legally recognized marriage (or, rather, to permit

individual states to do so). Moreover, both Justice Kennedy, who wrote the majority opinion, and Justice Stevens, in his dissenting opinion, draw a connection from *Lawrence* to same-sex marriage (567; 577). Eng points out that, for example, Kennedy's majority opinion analogizes "homosexual relationships to heterosexual marriage, thus inscribing queer liberalism into a normative discourse of family and family values" (42). Queer theorists (including Eng) have lately shown how the progressivist history of *Loving* to *Lawrence* and eventually to *Hollingsworth* is violently truncated and dangerously unnuanced.[10] Eng argues, "When queer liberals insist that *Lawrence* is 'our *Loving*' […] they foreclose the possibility of reading the *Lawrence* decision as part of a long legal tradition maintaining interlocking, indeed constitutive, systems of white supremacy and heterosexism foundational to liberal modernity's unending march of freedom and progress" (41). Still, though, *Lawrence* is implicitly about same-sex marriage in at least one narrow way, and I position it as such in this reading of Whitman's poem. The politics that enable a decision such as *Lawrence* are invested, first and foremost, in folding all possible queer subjects who are not racially or otherwise marked into the national project as liberal citizen-subjects by maintaining the value of privacy.[11] One way to fold in citizens is to remove punitive measures; another is to provide rights (such as the right to privacy).

In essence, *Lawrence* is "When I Heard at the Close of Day" taken to the courthouse: The gay male couple must be and should be rendered safe from prosecution by the state, so long as that couple's sex happens in private, is monogamous, might lead to marriage or a marriage-like formation, and does not disqualify its participants from adhering to the expectations of liberal citizenship. While *Lawrence* serves as legal precedent for same-sex marriage and certainly validates the monogamous domesticated couple, Whitman expresses the philosophy of privacy

that we see in *Lawrence* as he imagines a relationship between the state and the individual that gay marriage advocates share. In other words, these are parallel stories, albeit generically and historically dissimilar: Whitman's speaker on his secluded beach with his lover, laying under "autumn moonbeams" in the "cool night," the nation state keeping a watchful eye from the capitol building some distance away; and Lawrence and Garner having (consensual) anal sex in a "dwelling or other private place," protected by the state from intrusion by the state.

Beginning from these thematic parallels between one of Whitman's well-known poems of same-sex love and the legal case that some see as a foundation for marriage equality, this chapter explicates how the figure of Whitman—the canonical proto-gay American poet, national literary symbol of American democracy—has been positioned in much the way Whitman positions his queer speaker in "When I Heard at the Close of the Day." I argue that the neoliberal United States, which took its current shape in the mid-1990s, produced a Whitman around which the mainstream LGBT movement (of which same-sex marriage is the flagship political project) could gather in shared pride, in recognition, in a progressivist version of queer history. If, as the editor and literary critic Malcolm Cowley famously wrote at midcentury, "Very strange the amalgam he made between cocksucking and democracy," by the end of the century that amalgam no longer seemed quite so strange (Jay 273). Whitman, once the closeted patriot, became the gay American ur-citizen.

Rodger Streitmatter's *Outlaw Marriages: The Hidden Histories of Fifteen Extraordinary Same-Sex Couples* (2012) is an exemplary text through which to observe precisely how Whitman can be positioned as a precursor to contemporary gays and lesbians protesting for marriage rights. For Streitmatter, Whitman was a married gay man before gay marriage was imaginable.

The book's first chapter, subtitled "Revolutionizing American Poetry," recounts Whitman's relationship with Peter Doyle. The dates of the relationship, 1865 through 1892 according to Streitmatter, appear above a photo of Whitman and Doyle seated on a courting bench. Streitmatter's political goal is apparently to show how the Whitman/Doyle relationship resembles a contemporary marriage in order to justify same-sex marriage in his own historical moment. Rather than lingering on Whitman and Doyle's likely complicated relationship, Streitmatter highlights details like, for example, how Whitman brought flowers to Doyle, "much as a doting husband might bring to his wife" (5). Though there were a number of men in Whitman's life who were or might have been his lovers, Streitmatter's book focuses only on Doyle.[12] This focus is, of course, essential for pressing Whitman into service as a forerunner of gay marriage. Harry Stafford enters Streitmatter's account briefly, only long enough for him to explain, "Stafford never became as important to Whitman as Doyle was, but the aging poet was clearly smitten by the eighteen-year-old who he referred to as his 'darling boy'" (8). Here, Whitman becomes the older man unwisely attracted to a much younger lover (Stafford) at the expense of his relationship with his long-term partner (Doyle)—not so different from a prototypical middle-aged man who leaves his wife to begin dating a younger woman. In other words, Streitmatter applies twentieth century logics to Whitman and Doyle's nineteenth-century relationship because he wants to argue that Whitman and Doyle were, by any standard, married.

Streitmatter is not alone. Those who offer this teleological narrative, which depends on both the notion of progression from the past and continuity with the past, understand Whitman as ahead of his time, as a prophet whose democratic philosophy pointed American society toward the more just present in which we now supposedly live. Marriage equality thus becomes a

benchmark for measuring how well we have achieved Whitman's notion of the ideal republic, and, for those who favor this progressive narrative, Whitman's ideal republic is always one in which same-sex marriage is permitted. Typically, in these accounts, Whitman is depicted as a kind of father-figure, proud of some social changes and disappointed by our failure to make other changes. In a post-1990s revision of a long history that analogizes Whitman as a father (of American literature, of free verse, of self-fashioning, and so on), Whitman here becomes a *gay* father figure whose image can be deployed to contemporary mainstream gay political ends—gay men as fathers and husbands rather than, as Whitman's early biographer Gay Wilson Allen would have it, "solitary singer[s]." For example, in a 2011 article from *The Atlantic* appearing after the New York Supreme Court ruled in favor of gay marriage advocates, politician Kathleen Kennedy Townsend writes, "What a long way we've come. Whitman, who lived in Brooklyn for 28 years, would be astounded that New York has actually legalized same-sex marriage […T]he New York decision – [is a] victor[y] in the fight for gay and lesbian equality. […] The promise of freedom, equality, and happiness in the Declaration of Independence applies to [all]." Townsend's article, which primarily addresses economic inequities, is emblematic of the kind of source material currently proliferating around Whitman and same-sex marriage. Townsend begins her discussion with a point she posits as unquestionable: though Whitman might be "astounded" by the legalization of gay marriage, he would no doubt see it as a "victor[y]," as a mark of progress (as "a long way we've come"). As a result, she certifies his identity not only as a long-time resident of New York, but also as a proto-gay citizen of the United States. Under this rubric, Whitman is simplified and made useful for the mainstream version of contemporary gay politics.

If Townsend works to distinguish the present from the past in order to conclude that Whitman would be pleased with contemporary social changes, the poet Mark Doty labors to forge a connection with the past based on continuity and identification. In his long poem "Letter to Walt Whitman" (2003), Doty writes,

> Paul's done the laundry, and downstairs
> on the couch reads Proust. Soon we'll go out
> for Vietnamese. We have what amounts
> to marriage—sexy, serviceable, pleasant,
>
> plain. You might have lived like this
> awhile with Peter Doyle, who now can say?
> Of our company in your century,
> dust and silence almost all erase. (45)

In describing his relationship with Paul, the speaker links himself to Whitman (and Proust, for that matter), ultimately grouping them all together as "our company." The poem seems to suggest that the analogy of the two relationships (the speaker and Paul, Whitman and Doyle) across time is impossible, but the analogy is nevertheless supplied. Further, the injustices of history (denoted here by "dust and silence") have rendered homosexuality illegible in the past, which Doty counts as a loss to history.

Townsend's article, Doty's poem, and Streitmatter's chapter on Whitman and Doyle are exemplary texts for thinking about the strange and revealing conjunction of Whitman and same-sex marriage. The remainder of this chapter works to unravel this conjunction through attention to the history of Whitman studies, popular representations of Whitman, and the post-1992 moment of gay neoliberalism and one of its signal political projects, marriage equality. Although I began with a poem that I, alongside the editors of the various gay wedding websites noted above, read as explicitly matrimonial, even as engaged in a politics of specifically *same-sex*

marriage, my motivation throughout will not be to sustain such a deployment of Whitman. Instead, I am critical of representations of Whitman that position him as married (or desirous to be so) because I see those representations as insisting on a narrative of gay history that I am invested in destabilizing, one that insists both on progress over time and on continuity between present and past. My central goals, then, are twofold: First, to observe and clarify how and by what means Whitman became the quintessential literary historical figure of gay marriage (a gay cultural history project); and, second, to insist on an ethic of nostalgia as a way to bypass this gay democratic citizen-Whitman in order to uncover other Whitmans—in this chapter, a queer Whitman who slips out of the co-opting nationalist grip of neoliberal gay representation (a queer theoretical project).

Neoliberalism and Same-Sex Marriage

Representations of Whitman that celebrate him as gay marriage advocate proliferated in the 1990s and 2000s. During these years, the large-scale political shift to neoliberalism that had been occurring since the 1970s or earlier enfolded the gay rights movement and consequently helped to install marriage equality as the single most important LGBT political goal. As Lisa Duggan explains, on questions of sexuality in particular, "during the 1990s, something new happened" (xix).[13] Political theorists are accustomed to thinking of neoliberalism as a primarily economic formation, which it certainly is, underwriting the rise of global capitalism, the accrual of wealth among a select few, and the discursive split of economic policy from social ramifications. However, queer theorists have recently attended to how neoliberalism has brought

about a number of marked shifts in the past two decades specifically around issues of sexuality, which are always necessarily tied to economics.

Under neoliberalism in the 1990s and later, homonormativity (gay politics conforming to mainstream heteronorms), of which same-sex marriage is one illustration, is "not merely a position on the spectrum of gay movement politics, but is a crucial new part of the cultural front of neoliberalism" (Duggan 49). Marriage equality is essential to the economic policies of neoliberalism because it serves as a "coercive tool of the privatization of social costs," such as healthcare, childcare, and the like (17).[14] Homonormativity (and its projects, such as same-sex marriage), which Duggan connects to neoliberalism, depart significantly from the gay liberation movement of the late 1960s, 70s, and 80s. Before 1990s neoliberalism, gay movement activism was defined by opposition to the institution of marriage and alliances with other social justice movements such as feminism and environmentalism—all from the foundational tenet that social justice must not be incorporated into capitalism, imperialism, and globalization (xviii). As the neoliberal political dogma of the moment shifted from the Reagan-era culture wars to Clinton-era appeals to multicultural diversity, the gay movement shifted as well, becoming a lobbying platform for the mostly white, wealthy, gender-conforming gay elite (44-45).[15] Same-sex marriage took center stage as the most important, often the only extant, gay activist project. It is in this context that Jean and John L. Comaroff's incisive description of neoliberalism attains meaning particularly as a descriptor of gay and lesbian politics in the 1990s: Neoliberalism "reduce[s politics] to the pursuit of pure interest, individual or collective—or to struggles over issues [that are often] disconnected from anything beyond themselves" (322).

Neoliberalism's cultural politics are intricately tied to its economic vision. The neoliberal state, committed to global economic expansion and the proliferation of democracy, organizes itself to the benefit of a capitalism, managing and intervening in the market as needed (Duggan 10).[16] While the capitalist economic policies of neoliberalism are advertised as simple good sense, in fact those policies are complex, technical, and obscured; they are too complicated to form the basis for any kind of populist set of politics (Comaroff 305). Simultaneously, individuals come to conceive of themselves primarily as consumers rather than producers. In this way, economic class is not a mode through which to channel critique of "millennial capitalism"; rather, "class comes to be understood, in both popular and scholarly discourse, as yet another personal trait or lifestyle choice" (306). The individual becomes the only conceivable economic actor, which evacuates the possibility for class-consciousness. As a result, individual politics accumulate around issues of identity. And identity politics, be they based on gender, sexuality, race, or some other categorization, mushroom exponentially under neoliberalism. Comaroff and Comaroff summarize: "Here is the harsh underside of the culture of neoliberalism. It is a culture that […] revisions persons not as producers from a particular community, but as consumers in a planetary marketplace: persons as ensembles of identity that owe less to history or society than to organically conceived human qualities" (304). In this description of neoliberalism's cultural and economic values, we can start to see the beginnings of the kind of identity politics evident in same-sex marriage advocacy, not to mention the essentializing concepts of identity evident in gay origin stories of "born this way."

A 2009 commercial featuring Whitman's poetry exemplifies how the economics of neoliberalism can and do function alongside the facile multiculturalism that has become a

hallmark of American neoliberalism post-1992. The advertising genre lends itself to this kind of reading because, while other cultural products such as film and television can sometimes be said to be advertising for neoliberalism, however obliquely, a commercial does so literally and unashamedly. Further, particularly in recent years, likely in part because of shifts in how we consume television, commercials have become artistic pieces on their own terms, demanding attention and analysis. One such commercial is the Levi's Jeans ad, titled "O Pioneers," which eroticizes visual indeterminacy across gender, race, and sexuality. At the same time, it celebrates the American democratic project and normative American citizenship as it promotes the economics of individual consumerism disjointed from class (or race, or sex) consciousness. Drawing on both a queer version of Whitman that envisions erotic play between and among genders and races as well as a nationalist capitalist version of Whitman that is deployed to stabilize national identity, the ad dramatizes the dream of sociality without identity, except insofar as "identity" means American consumer.

In the commercial, an actor performs the text of Whitman's "O Pioneers," which serves as an aural backdrop accompanying clips of men and women of a variety of ages and races wearing jeans and other Levi's products. A portion of the images are filmed in the dark, beside a campsite, and another portion are filmed in the daytime, also outside. Most images depict people moving—running through the woods, doing cartwheels, jumping high in the air, kissing, riding bicycles. Almost every frame centers itself on a human body or human face (or a pair or group of human bodies). One recurring set of images shows, in a wide panoramic shot, a person or people, running, carrying a flag across a plain. Throughout, the camera tracks with jerking movement, focusing and unfocusing, giving the appearance of amateur camera work, as if one of the

commercial's young Levi's-attired subjects is also its auteur. The actor speaks Whitman's poem in a deep, loud, declarative tone and an accent that sounds slightly, though nonspecifically, old-fashioned, as if it could be Whitman himself speaking.[17]

The nineteenth-century expansionist vision of the commercial's poetic content, not to mention its rhetoric of American exceptionalism, easily translates to the neoliberal twenty-first century of expanding global capitalism. The poem reads, in part:

> Come, my tan-faced children,
> Follow well in order, get your weapons ready;
> Have you your pistols? Have you your sharp edged axes?
> Pioneers! O pioneers!
>
> For we cannot tarry here,
> We must march my darlings, we must bear the brunt of danger,
> We, the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend,
> Pioneers! O pioneers!
>
> O you youths, Western youths,
> So impatient, full of action, full of manly pride and friendship,
> Plain I see you, Western youths, see you tramping with the foremost,
> Pioneers! O pioneers! (*Leaves* 192)

For Whitman in 1850, American exceptionalism meant that "all the rest on us depend," even if "pistols" and "sharp-edged axes" were also required to ensure American primacy. For the Levi's company in 2009, that same optimistic battle-cry registers as a positive depiction of the export of American capitalism—its institutions, its philosophies, and its products, none more quintessentially American than the jeans depicted here. Sexuality and race figure into this story of America as well. Whitman's "tan-faced children" become Levi's diverse and, in some cases, racially-indeterminate (but nonetheless typically attractive) young models. Whitman's "manly pride and friendship" become the commercial's depiction of two men kissing passionately through an open door, one image assimilated among the many images of heterosexuality the

commercial also offers. This image is unusual in that it is laid over another image, which captures the recurring image of a tiny human figure carrying a flag across a hill, a nationalist image palimpsestically certifying the Americanness of the two men.

A prototypical Whitmanesque American landscape—lush green grass, a waterfall, a stream, etc.—serves as setting for the commercial. The colors throughout the piece are dark greens and bright yellows, along with some brown and orange shades, all befitting the natural outdoor setting. The commercial catalogs the contradictions of American modernity, positioning images of rural next to urban landscapes, nightlife and daytime, and manmade structures against natural backdrops. On the now-defunct "Go Forth" advertising campaign website, there was a short biography of Whitman that did not mention his status as proto-gay American poet, but framed him as a tool for self-help: "He saw the potential for greatness that lies in each of us to flourish in our personal search and build our brave vision of this country. Please accept his words as a small ray of hope" ("Go"). Whitman here becomes a proponent of individual, "personal" self-improvement, a representation that merges with Duggan's assessment that neoliberal economic policy is dependent on reproducing a particular kind of culture, one based on the pillars of "privatization" and "personal responsibility" (Duggan 12).

Despite the commercial's unquestionable artistic merit, which *Slate* critic Seth Stevenson describes as "expertly crafted and beautifully shot," "jarring and unexpected," an "artistic gem," which is "without a doubt the most arresting ad" of 2009, the ad nevertheless recalls Eng's and Jasbir Puar's critiques of the queer present, in which the capitalist underpinnings of the neoliberal state enable superficial multiculturalism, the privatization of risk, and the privileging of heteronormativity. In concrete terms, since the 1990s, increasing numbers of wealthy, white,

American gays and lesbians have begun to agitate for "equality," often in only the most narrow, normative, and capitalist-supporting ways. Puar shows how, in the last decades, American nationalist projects, rather than excluding gays and lesbians, have responded to those demands for equality by folding in certain kinds of gays and lesbians, those who are "complicit with heterosexual nationalist formations" and who "orient themselves as subjects through their disassociation or disidentification from others disenfranchised in similar ways in favor of consolidation with axes of privilege" (4; 28). Gay marriage is an attempt to access institutional structures that minimize risk, structures often denied or unevenly accessible to racial, ethnic, and national others. The desire for marriage equality is thus, from one angle, a "demand for the reinstatement of white privileges and white rights," many of which are economic (29). Recall the two attractive white men kissing through the doorway in the Levi's commercial, one shirtless, one with trendy eyeglasses. Recall, too, the accompanying Whitman poem telling us that they are young, manly, and, most vitally, American. As Eng explains, in our neoliberal queer moment, homosexuality becomes (nothing more than) a cultural difference and is therefore "desexualized, repackaged, and contained" (30).

Whitman as before-his-time proponent of marriage equality and gay monogamy—a kinship structure that functions, from the 1990s forward, to buoy capitalism's global dominance—embodies neoliberalism's literary imagination. Ultimately, contemporary marriage equality battles are not just battles about marriage equality, but are linked up with neoliberal projects of racial equality and representation, the upward redistribution of wealth, the privatization of risk, and others. To assign the literary historical figure Whitman to the position of marriage equality proponent is to knot that figure to these political projects, which are also

emblematic of neoliberalism. While I may attend most intensively to same-sex marriage as the illustration of neoliberalism, same-sex marriage is in fact only one thread of this much larger web. The energies of this chapter are directed toward pulling Whitman from that web by examining how neoliberalism has structured our literary and popular historical conception of him.

Whitman Studies Under Neoliberalism

In March of 1992, at The Centennial Conference commemorating the hundred-year anniversary of Whitman's death, Betsy Erkkila called for scholars to abandon their presumption that Whitman's identity as poet of democracy was entirely separable from his identity as poet of "cocksucking," terminology Erkkila borrows from Cowley's 1946 letter to Kenneth Burke, which I cited previously (Jay 273). Arguing both that Whitman's sexual desire for men is not ideologically separable from his democratic vision and, further, that he uses the language of democracy "to articulate and name his erotic feeling for men," Erkkila departs even from those critics who theretofore discussed Whitman's homosexual desire to any degree, who tended to delink it from his democratic project ("Homosexual Republic" 155). Toward this end, she examines a public service announcement from the late 1980s produced by the Philadelphia Lesbian and Gay Task Force. It never aired because television networks considered it inappropriate, as did the director of the Walt Whitman Poetry Center, who thought that definitive declaration to a wide audience of Whitman's same-sex desires would deter people from reading his poetry. In the PSA, a young man sits on a bench with the Walt Whitman Bridge in the background, explaining that, had he known Whitman was gay, he would have had an easier time

confronting the intolerance of his high school classmates and teachers. "Why didn't they tell me Walt Whitman was gay?" he asks. This PSA and Erkkila's analysis illustrate the representational and critical shift that interests me, so I quote at length:

> What the controversy suggests, finally, is the extent to which Whitman as the poet of the people, the poet of democracy, and the American poet, has also become an American public property whose image is bound up with the maintenance of American public health and American national policy. It is not only the academic and critical establishment but those in positions of social and cultural power, and, I would add, the national government itself, that are heavily invested in keeping Whitman's sexuality, and specifically his sexual love for men, out of any discussion of his role as poet of democracy, and the American poet. In other words, if we can control Whitman's sexuality, we can also control the sexuality of the nation. (154)

The foundation of Erkkila's timely argument—that Whitman's "image is bound up with the maintenance of […] American national policy" and that the state has a vested interest in "control[ling] Whitman's sexuality" in order to "control the sexuality of the nation"—remains true. Likewise does her provocative hitching of the "critical establishment," "social and cultural" trend-setters, and "the national government itself," at least when it comes to depictions of Whitman. However, the terms of that control and the nature of that vested interest have shifted in important ways since 1992. With respect to Whitman, popular representations and some academic scholarship have shifted in parallel to each other, refracting at the historical moment widely understood as the beginning of neoliberalism. Now, when we encounter Whitman in fictionalized representations, in newly-edited critical editions of his work, in deployments of his poetry and voice, and in literary historical appraisals, we often encounter a Whitman whose sexuality is no longer omitted from discussion of his democratic vision. Rather, he is deployed in these contexts precisely *because of* his sexuality, which is understood specifically as gay or proto-gay rather than fluid, bisexual, queer, or otherwise. Moreover, in contemporary criticism,

the author's proto-gay identity must be spoken; to do otherwise would be to risk the charge of homophobia. To borrow again from Cowley's terminology, the "amalgam" of "cocksucking" and "democracy" no longer seems "strange," but conventional. In this context, the figure of Whitman and the gay sexuality that attaches to him stabilize a liberal version of mainstream LGBT family life, a kind of family life that is essential to the project of democracy in a neoliberal moment. Ironically, the lifelong childless bachelor Whitman, who lived before the congealing of homosexual definition, now attains contemporary significance as the site of neoliberal gay culture's most vital origin stories, stories about the benefits of gay marriage and parenting.[18] Rather than excising Whitman's homosexuality from the historical record, these stories depend on his homosexuality as essential to their depictions of him as spouse, father, and ancestor and install him as the forerunner of gay neoliberal politics.

When Erkkila called for a renewed consideration of cocksucking alongside democracy in Whitman's work, she was responding to what she rightly understood as a rift between the two modes of scholarship. Indeed, any examination of Whitman studies between the centennial of the publication of the first *Leaves of Grass* in 1955 and Erkkila's call at the centennial of Whitman's death (1992) would prove her correct. To clarify, Erkkila's 1992 argument is not necessarily that Whitman scholars ignore his sexuality in total—although some do—but that they bracket that sexuality from his identity as a poet of democracy. A brief survey of Whitman biographies can gloss this tendency. The standard-bearer, Gay Wilson Allen's *The Solitary Singer* (1955), was republished in 1985. In the newer 1985 preface, Allen writes that, around 1857, Whitman's "love for some man, whether real or imaginary I do not know […] almost eclipsed his ambition to lead […] But this crisis passed, and he again embraced the Nation as his only mistress" (xii). Allen's

Whitman, a monk of democracy, has no partner other than the United States. The nation supplants the "real or imaginary" man Whitman might have "love[d]." Whitman as prophet of democracy and Whitman as a man with same-sex sexual attachments do not coexist. If Allen writes coyly here about Whitman's homosexuality and certainly severs it from his status as poet of democracy, he is even more coy in the text of the biography from 1955: "Of all the men with whom Whitman corresponded, Peter Doyle's friendship was the most lasting and most satisfying. But evidently there were times when he was emotionally disturbed even in his relations with Pete, though just why is not easy to determine" (399). This vagueness is odd given that Allen's assessment of Whitman's sexuality is largely self-evident in details Allen presents.[19] Both Allen and a later Whitman biographer, Justin Kaplan, label Whitman "homoerotic" though not homosexual because, as Allen explains, the term homosexual "implied a practitioner of pederasty; I had no firm evidence of such practice, and I preferred not to judge one way or the other—I did not say he was *not* a homosexual" (xi). For Kaplan's part, he admits that "With several young men [Whitman] was to know a certain love along with 'sullen and suffering hours,' hours of 'sick, sick dread.' But just as he had put himself in danger through poetry, through poetry he reconstituted himself and moved on to a new stage of composure and understanding" (239). Kaplan thus contrasts Whitman's sexuality, a destructive force, to his poetry, a consolidating and productive force. A 1969 collection of Whitman criticism edited by Edwin Haviland Miller is in keeping with the biographical work of Allen and Kaplan. Recounting John Addington Symonds's request for Whitman to admit and account for his homosexuality (in the language of congealing homosexual identity that was taking hold at the end of the century), Miller asserts that Symonds had "responded—perhaps overresponded—to

the ‘Calamus’ poems” (xxx). This passage serves to diagnose and define Symonds’s homosexuality but cloaks Whitman’s, writing that “such perhaps was [Symonds’s] guilt over his own homosexual tendencies and such was his desire to find consolation in having a revered father figure approve deviancy” (xxx). Erkkila’s assessment regarding the inability of critics, historians, and biographers to confront Whitman’s sexuality in productive, ethical ways rings true given these accounts.

In an interview, Ed Folsom explains that it was not until around 1975 that discussion of Whitman as gay or queer circulated in work of literary scholars and, on balance, it is certainly true that the bulk of work on Whitman and homosexuality occurred after 1975 or even later (qtd. in Silver 14).[20] Gary Schmidgall’s *Walt Whitman: A Gay Life* (1997) serves as an instructive contrast to both Allen’s 1955 and Kaplan’s 1980 biographies, but similarly confirms Erkkila’s hypothesis. In his introduction, Schmidgall contends that a biography centered around Whitman’s sexuality is sorely needed:

> Hitherto, scholarship has given us Whitman the *Poet and Person*, Whitman the *Magnificent Idler*, Whitman *An American*, Whitman the *Poet of Democracy*, Whitman the *Prophet of the New Era*, Whitman the *American Giant and Builder for America*, Whitman the *Yankee Redeemer*, Whitman the *Friend*, Whitman the *Legend*, and (more than once) plain old Whitman the *Man*. Why should we not, by way of ameliorating the imbalance of emphasis at this late date, have something like Whitman the *Gay Lover*, or *Pre-Stonewall Prophet*, or *Bather in Sex*? (xxviii; emphasis original)

Note how Schmidgall takes the neoliberal gay and lesbian commonplace, *Being gay is only one aspect of an identity, like any other*, and renders it onto the trajectory of Whitman biographies. At the same time, he implies that Whitman-as-gay is the bold new frontier of Whitman studies, assigning his biography to the culmination of a progress narrative of Whitman biographies going all the way back to Horace Traubel, the “phenomenally assiduous Boswell of [Whitman’s] final

four years" (xxxiii). Ultimately, Schmidgall comes somewhat closer to Erkkila's insistence on linking Whitman's democratic vision with his same-sex desire, but his attention is self-admittedly trained primarily on the latter rather than the former.

In 2011, Erkkila wrote again about Whitman's sexuality, this time collecting, editing, and composing the afterword to a volume of Whitman's poems. This collection, titled *Walt Whitman's Songs of Male Intimacy and Love,* brings together the unpublished "Live Oak, With Moss" sequence and the "Calamus" sequence of *Leaves of Grass*. The older, bearded Whitman—not the youthful Whitman typically credited with the radical queer energies of "Calamus"—stares out from the cover, seeming to look far into the distance (perhaps to the neoliberal historical moment that produced this collection). In her introduction, Erkkila writes, "One hundred and fifty years after Whitman expressed [the dream of 'a city…where men who love men can live and love openly in accord with their desires'] as part of a fully realized democracy in the United States and elsewhere, Whitman's own country is still locked in a struggle over whether men who love men have the same civil and legal rights as men who love women" (*Songs* Afterword xi). Here, Erkkila signals, by the language of "civil," "legal," and "rights," the possibility that Whitman's poetry—or, indeed, the figure of Whitman himself—might have something to tell us about the contemporary same-sex marriage debate. Schmidgall writes on the back cover of the edition, appraising it as "perfectly timed," suggesting that careful, sustained attention to Whitman can point the way toward an answer to *Hollingsworth v. Perry*, which was making its way through the courts at the time. Jonathan Ned Katz, another reviewer, similarly alludes to the "present import" of these poems. This "present import" is, in other words,

to make Whitman's "cocksucking" effect change on the terrain of contemporary democracy by making his poems of male adhesive love argue for marriage equality.

This contrast between Erkkila in 1992 and 2011 shows how Erkkila, among others, brought about a critical shift that is, in some ways, parallel to the broader cultural shift to neoliberalism: gays and lesbians, Whitman included, are now enfolded into the democratic nation state, for better or for worse, and often by means of marriage equality. Erikkila's intervention, in a literary field that was for too long silent on Whitman's sexuality, was crucial in shifting us to a more just and loving integration of Whitman's queer sexuality with his literary production. Further, I can only guess that Erkkila herself probably did not intend some of the insidious consequences of the conjunction of Whitman's "cocksucking and democracy." Nevertheless, Whitman's sexuality is managed differently now, in the moment of neoliberal focus on marriage equality, than it was when Erkkila first encouraged the literary-historical conjunction of the two. Now, editions of his poetry are published on the basis of the presumption that Whitman the American Poet and Whitman the Proto-Gay Poet are, decisively, one and the same, and popular representations have positioned him similarly. The remainder of my analysis attends particularly to the gay neoliberal Whitman who is popularly reimagined not as an asexual ancestor of democracy, but as a same-sex partner and citizen within the American democratic project.

Nostalgia for Whitman in the Era of Neoliberalism

In a 1997 episode of the historical drama *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, which depicts precisely this kind of gay neoliberal Whitman, the series' main character, Dr. Michaela Quinn,

treats an aging and ailing Whitman, who has just suffered his first stroke.[21] Not far into the episode, rumors begin to circulate in the western town. The mercantile store owner, the saloon owner, the barber, the minister, the black couple who own the town cafe, and Dr. Quinn's husband Sully (who lived for a period of time with the nearby Native American tribe), all express varying opinions about Whitman's "deviant" sexuality. It is not until well over halfway through the episode, however, that Dr. Quinn discovers the truth about Whitman's sexuality. In the meantime, Whitman has been spending time in the woods with Dr. Quinn's adopted son Brian, an aspiring writer. When Dr. Quinn finds out the truth about Whitman's sexuality, she is concerned about the relationship between the two. Of course, she fails to specify exactly why she is concerned, but the viewer is led to believe she must be worried that Whitman is molesting Brian. (One critic aptly calls Dr. Quinn's fear a "sensationalized […] rehearsal of contemporary fears about gay men" [Henderson 69-70].) Dr. Quinn, a proto-feminist figure whose education makes her exceptional in her historical context, is the heroine of the series. The twentieth-century viewer's ability to empathize and identify with Dr. Quinn is one of the narrative techniques on which the series is based.

Whitman's time-traveling television visit to Colorado Springs occurs in 1997, an important year in the era of gay neoliberalism.[22] A shift was underway in popular culture that reflected the broader political and cultural shift to neoliberalism, in which gays and lesbians were increasingly folded into the democratic capitalist project. Calls for acceptance and tolerance became more commonplace; explicit homophobia was increasingly frowned upon, at least in the mainstream media. Perhaps unexpectedly, television, long considered one of the most conservative media because of its dependence on advertising revenue, staged this shift in social

attitudes. However conservative the genre might have historically been, though, it offers viewers an emotional connection with characters over a number of years, producing intense viewer commitment, which potentially enables risk-taking around issues such as homosexuality. In 1996, *Friends* featured a lesbian wedding between two recurring characters. The year of the Whitman *Dr. Quinn* episode, 1997, was also the year of Ellen Degeneres's famous coming out both on her sitcom and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. The following year, *Will & Grace* premiered to critical and popular success. Two years later, in 2000, teen drama *Dawson's Creek* was the first to depict an open-mouthed kiss between two men. *Entertainment Weekly*'s 1995 cover proved true throughout the decade: These were definitely "The Gay 90s," both for the entertainment industry at large and television entertainment more specifically. Whitman, however, is a seemingly strange addition to the so-called gay 1990s. After all, he is more often connected to that other "gay 90s"—the 1890s.

Nonetheless, the figure of Whitman in this episode performs cultural work in service to the neoliberal gay culture of the 1990s. Within a cultural product that is in some ways deeply nostalgic—a family television series that depicts a supposedly simpler time—the deployment of Whitman underlines just how progressivist the series' nostalgia in fact is. Here, the aesthetics of nostalgia—the period props and costumes, the dialogue that is both regionalized and formalized—undergird anti-nostalgic theme and content. Recall Svetlana Boym's two types of nostalgia: The first, of which this series is exemplary, is "restorative" nostalgia, which "attempts a transhistorical reconstruction" of the past based on "truth and tradition" (xviii). The other, which this series lacks, is "reflective" nostalgia, a feeling of longing that "wistfully, ironically, desperately" "dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging" (xviii). In other

words, *Dr. Quinn*'s political project is "restorative" and "transhistorical" rather than "reflective" and "ambivalen[t]". First, the episode insists that Whitman must be claimed as a gay American author. In fact, one scholar refers to this episode as "The Prime-time 'Outing' of Walt Whitman" (Henderson). Second, the episode privileges the narratives about sexuality that prevail in the contemporary moment rather than Whitman's historical moment. In other words, it is those characters who express the live-and-let-live dogma of 1990s gay liberalism who end up being portrayed most sympathetically (for example, Grace, the black café owner from New Orleans, and Sully). Representations of bigotry, too, are portrayed in their 1990s rather than 1870s form: As Whitman and Doyle walk down the street arm in arm, the crowd stares at them, whispering and pointing. Joann Krieg rightly notes in her review of the episode, "historically same sex attachments probably did not call forth the kinds of reactions portrayed in the story" (202). Third, the anxieties of the present are pushed to the fore. Recall Dr. Quinn's worry that Whitman was taking Brian to the woods in order to molest him. And finally, most saliently for the present argument, Whitman's relationship with Peter Doyle is rendered as a marriage recognizable to the contemporary moment. This occurs in 1997, just as the marriage equality movement begins to amass victories and cement its place as the central gay rights cause.[23]

Doyle's appearance comes late in the episode. The viewer is prepared for it, though Dr. Quinn is not. Initially, the town minister and others refuse to support Whitman's poetry reading because his poems are known to be "racy," so, when Preston cancels it, Dr. Quinn assumes it is because of the general sexual content in Whitman's work (and, indeed, scholars know that Whitman's contemporaries were typically most concerned about Whitman's "racy" heterosexual poems rather than his homosexual ones). Dr. Quinn takes it on herself to secure a new location

for the reading. She finds Whitman bathing in the springs at the resort and they have a short conversation during which Whitman tells her that he has received a proposal of marriage from a woman via letter.[24] Upon finding out that Whitman does indeed have a "beloved," which he avoids speaking of in gendered pronouns, Dr. Quinn suggests that he invite his beloved to Colorado Springs since the support will aide in his recovery. This vague introduction to Doyle is couched in explicitly marital terms (as the equal alternative to the unnamed woman's mailed proposal) and the portrayal of their relationship throughout the episode maintains the theme. For instance, when Dr. Quinn and Whitman talk about his poetry, she remarks that she can "appreciate it more fully" now that she is a "married woman." Whitman's response prepares us, much later in the episode, to understand Doyle as Whitman's marital partner: "Never married myself. I've known love, though. Yes, indeed. I've known love." In a later scene, Whitman protectively shelters Doyle both physically and verbally from the assaults of the angry townspeople, gendering the relationship between the two men. Desiree Henderson writes that Doyle is "the sexual content of Whitman's poetry made disturbingly real," which is certainly true for some of the bigoted townspeople the episode depicts. However, I argue that, ultimately, Doyle's appearance—as apparently monogamous partner, as "beloved," as a sweet and somewhat simple man, as a helpmate and companion—in fact enables Dr. Quinn's sympathy for Whitman, and therefore the viewer's sympathy as well (70).

In a broader sense, then, Dr. Quinn, the typically fair-minded and forward-thinking central character, does the cultural work from inside the world of the TV series that ushers Whitman into the American neoliberal political project existing outside the world of the TV series. By depending on viewers to identify with Dr. Quinn's crisis of conscience, the episode

implicitly asks them to follow her lead when she eventually accepts Whitman, even given his non-normative sexuality and the intolerant views of the majority of other characters. Because she expresses anxieties about Whitman's relationship with her son but at the same time offers the room in her clinic to Whitman and Doyle as a place to stay, a viewer of whatever political ilk is likely to be convinced of Dr. Quinn's even-handed fairness. As Henderson argues, "Dr. Quinn must reconcile her own fears about Whitman's sexuality in order to direct the proper response of the town and her family [and, I would add, the episode's viewer] in the face of these actions" (70). Even with Dr. Quinn as his sponsor and guide, however, Whitman (standing in for "sexual deviants" more broadly), must pay a price for entrance into the neoliberal national polity. That price comes in the form of surveillance by the beneficent sponsor herself, who expends significant investigative energy to assure herself of Whitman's acceptability as a neoliberal subject. She and Sully follow Whitman and Brian into the woods, where they hide behind some bushes to observe the poet and the boy (surveillance very literally). She reads a medical journal article about Whitman's "condition" (surveillance by sexology). She spies on Whitman and Doyle, behaving as the picture of normative coupledom, reading Whitman's fan letters in their room at her clinic (surveillance by property ownership). Armed with her evidence, she finally assures herself and the viewer of three things: a) Whitman is not a child molester; b) Whitman's sexuality is unchangeable; and c) Whitman is normatively coupled. It is then, and only then, that the episode ends happily, with a small but supportive crowd listening to Whitman read his poem, "There Was a Child Went Forth," against a backdrop of an idyllic American mountain range. Thus, Dr. Quinn herself is able to link the neoliberal project of 1997 to the episode's 1870s plot.

Henderson is only partly right, then, when she explains that, by the end of the episode, Whitman is

> redeemed as the great American poet. With Whitman's return to his initial identity, Dr. Quinn is able to forgive or even forget his sexual identity. He is exonerated by his official status as "Poet." As a representative figure, Whitman can be (re)categorized into the melodramatic script of identity, and in this way, contained, sanitized, and romanticized. (75)

Yes, Whitman is redeemed as American poet. But, in view of recent work on neoliberalism and queer liberalism, Whitman's sexuality is in fact essential to this 1997 redemption. Henderson's argument is a generic one: *Dr. Quinn* is a melodrama and melodramas portray "character-types […] identified by a single, often superficially visible, marker that is both their type and their internal being" (70). For Henderson, *Dr. Quinn*'s Whitman can be either American Poet or American Homosexual, not both. My argument, however, places the episode in a longer history of gay neoliberalism. I am arguing that the sanitization of Whitman happens not through Dr. Quinn's *forgetting* of Whitman's sexuality, but precisely through her *certainty* about it. By surveillance she is able to manage Whitman's sexuality, understand it, and package it so it can be palatable by others, all of which is far from forgetting. The viewer cannot forget, either. One of Whitman's last lines in the episode, as he reads and the camera pans upward to take in the purple mountains majesty, mentions "the friendly boys that passed […]." To put it baldly, it would be difficult to forget Whitman's sexuality when we are left with Whitman's ruminations on "friendly boys." It is not that Whitman's homosexuality is covered over here; it is that we know his homosexuality is not coexistent with pedophilia and thus can be made to conform to monogamous heteronormative coupledom. In one way, then, I am suggesting that the deployment of Whitman here is actually more insidious than Henderson argues: Dr. Quinn

ushers Whitman into the neoliberal political landscape not by evacuating him of homosexual content but by surveilling that homosexual content and declaring it normative (enough). My argument is thus more akin to John Champagne's claim that Whitman is a gay poet for the contemporary moment: He "may inadvertently serve the present political moment, characterized by, among other things, a rampant commodification of gay identity and the Bush administration's increasingly open hostility to democracy—two developments that, in this postmodern world, we may be unaccustomed to seeing as related" (650).

Queer Nostalgia for the "City of Orgies"

Whitman has become one of the signal literary historical figures of neoliberal political projects in general and of same-sex marriage specifically. This deployment depends on two narratives that, I argue, flatten the ambiguity and complexity of both the poet and his historical moment, not to mention to queer lives in both the past and present. The first is the progressive narrative, which insists that things have gotten better for queers since Whitman's time. In "The Body Electric," the townspeople regard Whitman skeptically and even hatefully, but Dr. Quinn ushers the poet into the future (the viewer's present). By episode's end, the 1997 viewer can rest assured that progress has been made not only over the course of the episode but also over the course of the intervening century. The second is the narrative of continuity, which constructs historically-suspect parallels between identities and social formations in the past and those in the present. The continuity narrative insists, for instance, that Whitman and Doyle desired marriage rights—and indeed, understood those rights as central to their citizenship—in the same fashion as gay and lesbian couples today. In "The Body Electric," Dr. Quinn can tolerate Whitman's

non-normative sexuality in large part because she can recognize his relationship with Doyle as similar to her own relationship with her husband. The married heterosexual viewer can follow Dr. Quinn, connecting Whitman's 1870s same-sex relationship with his/her own contemporary marriage.

Paradoxically, the progress narrative and the narrative of continuity often coexist. Both narratives, however, oppose the ethic of nostalgia, which functions as an alternative. In emphasizing nostalgia an analytical tool, I am theorizing alongside Peter Coviello, who recently offered the concept of "earliness" as a mode for thinking about the resistance of some nineteenth-century writers against the turn toward a calcified definition of homosexuality that was occurring at century's end. Coviello's conceptualization of Whitman as invested in futurity without biological reproduction—a proponent of a kind of "carnally saturated" family that is neither normatively heterosexual nor normatively reproductive—is perhaps the only extant critical or popular appraisal of Whitman that is inflected by nostalgia (60). As such, Coviello shows, in part, how powerful a nostalgically-inflected criticism can be. "Earliness," which he defines as "the experience of sexuality as something in the crosshairs of a number of forms of knowledge and regulation *but not yet wholly captivated or made coordinate by them*" is a helpful analytic, I argue, precisely because it depends on nostalgia (7; emphasis original). Coviello not only attends to, for instance, various authors' own "nostalgia for the presexological past" (5), but also suggests how their resistance to what he calls "the liberalization of sexuality" (22) is instructive for contemporary queers, ultimately emboldening his reader to feel nostalgic:

> [Whitman, James, Jewett et al] share a resistance […] to the turning of sex into another of the liberal self's secured properties, into something each of us, alone, is understood to *have*. This is a resistance we might do well to consider closely, since that privatization of sex is so much a part of even our strongest critical

> languages about sexuality. By laboring to wrench sex away from not only punitive languages but from *possessive* understandings of sexuality […] the writers of the American nineteenth century have an enormous amount to teach us here in the new millennium, where the energy and insight of two decades of dynamic queer scholarship has yielded to a national moment of astonishing hostility and intransigence […The authors], allergic as they are to the liberalization of sexuality, provide a fantastically rich resource for the articulation of sex away from its possessivist moorings, as something other that the accoutrement of the private self, and as something more like a mode of relation, a style of affiliation, even, for some, a blueprint for sociality. (22; emphases original)

If the authors in Coviello's study are nostalgic, so, too, is Coviello himself. In the past, he locates the promise of a queer future that the gay neoliberal present moment fails to imagine but would do well to discover.

Taking Coviello's cue, I insist that the proto-gay Whitman that *Calamus* offers is not the only Whitman the poems allow us to access. Elsewhere in the sequence, he conceives of sexuality as, in Coveillo's words, "a mode of relation, a style of affiliation, […] a blueprint for sociality" (22). This queer, historically-specific Whitman is an antidote to the gay neoliberal marriage advocate with which we are too often presented. The *Calamus* poems sometimes celebrate the proto-marital monogamous union of the speaker and another man—as contemporary gay activists have noted—but just as often they celebrate the queer possibilities of the multiple and the ephemeral. For instance, in "These I Singing in Spring," the speaker places himself at the center of "a troop" of "the spirits of dear friends dead or alive," "some walk[ing] by [his] side and some behind, and some embrac[ing his] arms and neck" (*Leaves* 101). In "City of Orgies," he thanks Manhattan, his lover, for the gift of more "lovers, continual lovers" (107). There is, in short, as these examples attest, a story in *Calamus* that differs from the one in which two monogamously-coupled men celebrate their union on the beach. It is a story for which

contemporary queers might rightly feel deeply nostalgic, limited as the contemporary progressivist narrative is.

[1] These critics are, respectively, Alan Helms, "'Live Oak with Moss,'" 401; Richard Raleigh, 769; Hershel Parker, 145; Joseph Cady, "Not Happy in the Capitol: Homosexuality and the *Calamus* Poems," 17; Alan Helms, "Whitman's 'Live Oak with Moss,'" 188; and Richard Raleigh, ibid.

[2] For example, see Osworth, Smith, and "Wedding Readings." Another Whitman poem, "Song of the Open Road," is also a popular wedding reading.

[3] This is the version of the poem that appeared in the 1891-2 deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*, reprinted in *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings* (edited by Michael Moon), but it was unchanged after its initial 1860 publication except that it took its current title in 1867 (105 n.5). The poem is also part of the "Live Oak" sequence that Betsy Erkkila reprints in *Walt Whitman's Songs of Male Intimacy and Love* (2012), where it appeared as the penultimate poem.

[4] Joseph Cady's late-1970s liberationist reading of "When I Heard at the Close of the Day" insists that the poem offers a gender non-conforming speaker committed to the radical and subversive possibilities of homosexual relationships. Cady concludes that, because carousing in public and accomplishing goals are gendered as male, the speaker's rejection of those activities is ultimately a rejection of "the heterosexual model" of relationships. Similarly, Cady, not unlike other readers of the poem (see note 1 above), focuses on "Whitman's separation" from the capitol as a radical break with oppressive society ("Not Happy" 20). Readings like this miss the crucial element of the poem that I argue renders it most appealing now as a gay wedding poem: The speaker may leave the capitol, but the capitol remains within the world of the poem. Moreover, Cady's reading falls victim to the presumption that male homosexuality must always be subversive: "[F]or all homosexuals, which is not true for all heterosexuals, the moment of love always has the potential to be socially subversive" because society, broadly, does not approve, a fact which "inevitably place[s gay people] in opposition to [the] established heterosexual model for identity, relationships and nature" (20). Now, in the age of gay marriage, gay neoliberalism, and homonormativity, Cady's reading may call for reconsideration.

[5] Richard Raleigh contends that, formally, the poem "might be regarded as an inverted Italian sonnet, with the transition announced by the 'But' at the beginning of the third line and coming to full closure in the final line of the opening sestet. The shortened 'octave' then narrates the activities of the three days that separate the speaker from the meeting with his 'lover'" (768).

[6] Readers can link the speaker's accomplishments to Whitman's own desire for fame as national poet. Recall his first *Leaves of Grass* preface, in which he writes, "The proof of the poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he absorbed it" (636).

[7] It is unclear whether the speaker is actually located at the capitol building in the first two lines of the poem, or whether he only hears the "plaudits" from some distance away. However, this distinction is not centrally important to the argument I'm making.

[8] The case now known as *Hollingsworth v. Perry* was formerly known as *Perry v. Brown* and *Perry v. Schwarzenegger*.

[9] Jasbir Puar states that *Loving v. Virginia* is "rarely mentioned in connection to *Lawrence-Garner*," but I am skeptical of this claim (130). When Puar published *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007), the gay marriage movement was only just beginning to be publicized nationally, so the narrative of *Loving* to *Lawrence* to same-sex marriage probably had not yet taken hold. Nevertheless, the three cases (*Loving, Lawrence,* and *Hollingsworth*) are indeed often connected in both academic and popular contexts. The threat of gay marriage is one of the often-cited fears of conservative anti-gay activists who opposed the *Lawrence* decision. In addition, queer theorists such as David Eng have asserted that the connection among the three has often been made (41). Finally, legal scholars write that the logic of *Lawrence* echoes *Loving*'s logic (see Karlan). What Puar seems to be getting at by contending— somewhat surprisingly and at least partially incorrectly—that *Lawrence* hasn't been connected to *Loving* is a broader argument that the interracial relationship at the heart of *Lawrence* has been mostly ignored and so, in that way, the connection to *Loving* has been obscured.

[10] For an argument against reading legal cases through precedents because that logic precludes intersectional theorizations, see Somerville. Puar builds on Somerville's thesis by arguing against what she calls vertical readings of legal precedent in favor of horizontal readings of contemporaneous legal cases.

[11] If the stories that circulate about the *Lawrence* case elide issues of racial difference, Whitman's proto-gay marriage poem may be guilty of the same charge. In "'That towering bulge of pure white': Whitman, Melville, the Capitol Dome, and Black America" (*Leviathan* 16.1, 2004), Whitman scholar Ed Folsom traces Whitman's encounters with the Capitol dome (the rounded top part of the structure), which was being constructed in the first half of the 1860s. Folsom writes that, during that time, "it was impossible not to think of race when looking at the Capitol dome" because it was "a giant white dome […] topped with a figurehead of Freedom, imaged originally as a manumitted slave" (97). Drawing on Whitman's notebooks and correspondence, Folsom shows how, for Whitman, the Dome itself came to symbolize the reunification of white northerners and white southerners after the Civil War, ultimately a white supremacist position.

[12] For an overview of Whitman's probable or potential lovers (with photographs), see Ed Folsom's "Whitman's Calamus Photographs." One of Folsom's arguments is that pictures of Whitman taken with Doyle, Harry Stafford, Warren Fritzinger, and Bill Duckett are all similarly posed, a pose that Folsom refers to as the "marriage pose" (210). Folsom's broader concern in this essay is how Whitman used photographs of himself with others—his "alternative affectional family" (194)—to construct a public persona.

[13] Lisa Duggan shows how neoliberalism differs fundamentally from classic liberalism, though it did develop from it and is certainly related to it. One of the main features of classic liberalism is the discursive separation between what is "private" and what is "public." Although categories like "the state, the economy, civil society, and the family" can each shift between private and public designations, public and private remain the terms by which classic liberalism divides the political landscape (4). As a result, critiques of economic inequality are isolated from demands for inclusion and citizenship on the basis of sexual, racial, and other identities. The demarcation of public from private, the binary created by that demarcation, and all the various and fluctuating

binaries that coalesce around public/private are discursive acts, which create as much as label the political field.

[14] Jaye Cee Whitehead concurs with Duggan, explaining how neoliberal presidents as varied as George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama have deployed marriage-promotion rhetoric and policies that position marriage as a solution to poverty (14). Marriage, inexpensive for the state, serves as a "mechanism to regulate life's risks" (31).

[15] With the election of the neoliberal New Democrat Bill Clinton as U.S. President in 1992, neoliberal cultural politics underwent an important and notable shift—away from allegiance to the conservative culture wars politics of the Reagan/Thatcher era that opposed feminist and LGBT political projects and toward an allegiance to the Clinton-era ethos of citizenship, representation, and facile multiculturalism for all (Duggan 53). The politics that prevailed during the culture wars still existed through the 1990s and 2000s in some form, in some places, and at some moments. However, for the most part, these politics "receded from the national political state in favor of an emergent rhetorical commitment to diversity, and to a narrow, formal, nonredistributive form of 'equality' politics for the new millennium" (44). However, this appearance of alliance with egalitarian values is ultimately nothing more than appearance in a neoliberal landscape in which the central projects are the constant funneling upward of money and resources, the shrinking of the public sphere required by that funneling, and the cultural values that sustain the notion that economic growth is an unquestionable good.

[16] In practical terms, then, neoliberalism essentially locks the entire legible political field into a belief system marked by pro-capitalist economic politics and whatever cultural politics will best serve those economics in any given moment or space (Duggan 10). And, thus, the politics of identity reign and class-based critique all but vanishes (Comaroff 327). The "culture of legality" intensifies through widespread belief in "the capacity of constitutionalism and contract, rights and legal remedies, to accomplish order, civility, justice, empowerment" (328). The nation-state, though still symbolically formidable, is rendered economically meaningless except as it bolsters the wealth production and consolidation of global capitalism (324). Individual nation-states, though their economic fates may differ remarkably among each other, become more and more structurally similar as all are forced to adhere to capitalist economic models.

[17] The companion commercial in the Levi's "Go Forth" series, "America," uses a voice that many believe is a wax recording of Whitman himself reading his poem of the same name.

[18] When John Addington Symonds, early British activist of male same-sex desire, pressed Whitman to admit his homosexuality, Whitman wrote to Symonds that he had fathered six children. Scholars and biographers are now certain that Whitman's claim of paternity was a lie meant to deter Symonds from pressing further (See Coviello, 62-3).

[19] Allen states that Whitman might have been having an affair with a woman in 1870 but, if he were, Peter Doyle would most certainly have known about it (422). Allen quotes Doyle's assessment of Whitman's relationships with women: "So far as I have any knowledge of them, [those relationships] were always noble and on the highest plane" (422). Allen explains "adhesiveness" as "male friendship" and as "*affection* for a man as distinguished from 'amativeness,' or heterosexual *attraction*" (423; emphasis mine). This definitional sleight of hand exchanges affection for attraction when the gender of the object choice shifts. Finally,

Allen notes that, after Whitman and Doyle's correspondence ceased, Harry Stafford "came nearest to filling Peter's place, but he seems to have lacked Peter's stability, and it is doubtful that Whitman himself was still capable of the same intense personal interest in anyone that he had taken in the young Washington streetcar conductor" (504-5).

[20] Particularly important readings of Whitman's sexuality and/or of Whitman as a poet of same-sex sexuality are Robert K. Martin, "Homosexual Dream and Vision"; Joseph Cady, "Drum-Taps and Nineteenth-Century Male Homosexual Literature"; Charles Shively, *Calamus Lovers: Walt Whitman's Working Class Camerados*; Alan Helms, "Whitman's 'Live Oak with Moss'"; Michael Moon, "Rereading Whitman under Pressure of AIDS: His Sex Radicalism and Ours"; Erkkila, "Whitman and the Homosexual Republic" (cited elsewhere in this chapter); Thomas Yingling, "Homosexuality and Utopian Discourse in American Poetry"; and John Champagne, "Walt Whitman, Our Great Gay Poet?" (cited elsewhere in this chapter).

[21] The episode is likely meant to take place sometime during 1873.

Andrew Jewell and Kenneth Price survey Whitman's other appearances on television. The poet receives brief mention on a late-1995 episode of *The Simpsons*, a 1962 episode of *The Twilight Zone*, a 1999 episode of *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, and a 2003 episode of the comedy *Friends* (348-50). In none of these shows is the historical Whitman or his poetry featured. Whitman's poetry has been featured on several other shows, however, even if not centrally. A character on a 1995 episode of *ER* reads Whitman's "Passage to India" as he lies in the hospital, while another character reads from section six of Whitman's "Song of Myself" at a funeral on a 2002 episode of the pay-cable drama *Six Feet Under* (348-9). In a 1990 episode of *Northern Exposure*, a rural-Alaska radio DJ is fired (temporarily) for reading Whitman's poetry on the air and acknowledging Whitman's sexuality (351). The event sparks a debate in the town about homosexuality (351).

[22] Because I am positioning this Whitman representation, along with Streitmatter's book, a number of gay wedding websites, Doty's poem, Townsend's article, and Erkkila's 2012 *Songs of Male Intimacy and Love* within a conversation about gay neoliberalism and queer theory, 1992 or thereabouts is the historical moment of interest to me. In citing 1992 as the year of a cultural shift, I am modifying previous work on Whitman in popular culture. Kenneth Price narrows on 1980 rather than the early 1990s. After 1980, he writes, there was a "flurry of interest" in adapting Whitman and his work, most of which was characterized by an interest in Whitman's sexuality (108). Whitman representations before 1980 were more likely to engage with Whitman as a poet of spirituality rather than as a poet of sexuality (114). However, Price argues, post-1980 representations began to appropriate "Whitman as a relatively unthreatening entry-way into consideration of same-sex love" (125). His name, his image, and his writings have become "convenient shorthand" and "badge[s] of recognition" for specifically same-sex desire (137-8). 1980 is a useful marker for Price's analysis for a few reasons. In 1968, decency codes that served to bar Hollywood directors from depicting homosexuality were lifted and, around that same time, the findings of the Kinsey Report gained greater widespread acceptance (125-6). The Stonewall Riots occurred in 1969, igniting a more unified gay liberation movement; adjacently, gay scholars began to insist that Whitman be understood as homosexual (126). Finally, the pre-twentieth century figure of Whitman offered an innocuous counter-example of homosexuality that opposed the terror of the AIDS crisis (126).

[23] The first contemporary legal battle for same-sex marriage was working its way through the Hawaii state courts between 1990 and 2000. In 1996, Bill Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act, which allowed states to refuse to recognize marriages granted in other states.

[24] Anne Gilchrist, a British reader of Whitman, famously proposed to him via mail. The episode may be alluding to Gilchrist in this scene (See Loving, 330).

CHAPTER TWO

"It never really was the same": *Brother to Brother*'s Black and White and Queer Nostalgia

Having traced the anti-nostalgic progressivist narratives that accumulate around contemporary deployments of Walt Whitman in the same-sex marriage movement and pointed toward an alternative Whitman contemporary queers might embrace instead, I now turn to a thoroughly nostalgic depiction of another queer American literary figure, Richard Bruce Nugent. This chapter and those that follow depart from the paradigm of the previous chapter, in which I uncovered the problems of queer narratives of progress and continuity, and move into a more positive key—the location of productive kinds of queer nostalgia at a number of queer literary and cultural sites. Like Whitman's moment of congealing homosexual identity, the Harlem Renaissance moment has been a rich historical well for queer retrospection. While the last chapter describes a literary relationship between Whitman's late 1800s and the 1990s of marriage equality activism, this chapter charts a connection between the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the early 2000s moment of paranoia around the so-called "down low."

The 2004 film *Brother to Brother*, written and directed by Rodney Evans, presents a fictionalized account of the final months of the life of Nugent, a Harlem Renaissance artist and writer. Interspersed among scenes of the elderly Nugent (Roger Robinson) mentoring a young artist, Perry Williams (Anthony Mackie), are black and white flashbacks to 1926, the year the young Nugent (Duane Boutte), along with Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Aaron Douglas, and Zora Neale Hurston conceived of, created, and published what was to be the only issue of *Fire!!: A Quarterly Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists*.[1] In a scene from the film's present,

sometime in the late 1990s or early 2000s, Perry and the older Nugent sit on the floor in the hallway of the now-dilapidated and abandoned Niggeratti Manor, where several of the *Fire!!* contributors lived during the 1920s.[2] Nugent narrates Thurman's death from alcoholism, and Perry asks him what happened to the others. Nugent nostalgically replies, "I still saw them, but after that, it wasn't the same. Times changed. The Depression set in and people really thought our excesses was [sic] what brought it on. It never really was the same. That sense of risk and magic was gone." The "sense" to which Nugent refers is marked as queer – risky, magical, and excessive—and no longer exists in the present.[3] As he longs for the queer past, he provides a thoroughly nostalgic historical narrative; indeed, nostalgic feeling characterizes the film as a whole. At first glance, the two storylines in the film neatly parallel each other: Perry, coming of age at the end of the twentieth century, and the young Nugent, coming of age at the beginning of the twentieth century, negotiate their intersecting identities with difficulty. However, queer nostalgia prevails in the contrast between these two historical moments. It is Perry's contemporary moment—one in which he is thrown out of his family's home because he is gay, racially fetishized by an insensitive white lover, and beaten by a group of homophobic classmates—rather than Nugent's historical moment that is positioned as more untenable for the gay, black artist. Starting from this historical contrast, this chapter is an exploration of *Brother to Brother*'s queer nostalgia. It begins a the statement from the fictionalized Nugent—"it never really was the same"—which imagines a past that may have offered pleasures, communities, and opportunities inaccessible in the present.

Queer nostalgia propels *Brother to Brother* in part through the layering of black and white scenes, scenes in color, and archival footage. The film moves between the mid-twenties

Harlem of Nugent's youth, filmed in black and white flashback, and the early 2000s New York City of Perry's youth, filmed in color. Simon Dickel argues that, in contrast to Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* (1989), which covers some of the same thematic ground as *Brother to Brother*, Evans's film uses a combination of color and black and white film to draw a distinction between the past and the present. While *Looking for Langston* "connect[s] three different historical periods" and "constructs a genealogy of black homosexual/gay art" by using solely black and white film, *Brother to Brother* is interested in contrast, in historical difference (116).[4] Extending Dickel's argument, I posit that it is not simply historical difference that *Brother to Brother* endeavors to represent, but more specifically, a preference for the earlier historical moment over the contemporary moment. It is in this respect that my argument departs from Gilad Padva's recent reading of *Brother to Brother*, in which the specificity of nostalgia that I insist on—nostalgia as a feeling for how life was in some way better or more appealing in the past than it is in the present—drops out of view in favor of a broad definition of nostalgia that, at some points, reads as synonymous with recollection, remembrance, or re-creation. For instance, he writes, "nostalgia should not be underestimated or disregarded. It is a personal, social, and communal phenomenon that plays an important role in the collective memory of almost every community, whether it is national, social, occupational, gender, or sexual community" (5). To put it simply, Padva defines nostalgia as a connection between the past and the present based on memory, so he concentrates on parallels between Perry's life experiences and those of Nughes, Hughes, Hurston et al. In contrast, I insist on nostalgia in this film and elsewhere not only as a connection to the past, but a relational comparison, ultimately a value judgment in favor of the past.

As the narrative begins, Perry has been thrown out of his parents' home because his father discovered him in a romantic embrace with a man. He attends college, embarks on a career as a visual artist, and works at a homeless shelter. There, he meets a man he later realizes is Richard Bruce Nugent, and the two become friends. As the friendship deepens, Nugent begins to recall his experiences during the Harlem Renaissance. These scenes depict historical events, but are filtered through the fictional Nugent's memory and are narrated by him in voiceover: the first time he meets Wallace Thurman after moving to New York, his nightly walks with Langston Hughes, gin-soaked rent parties, the rejection he and the other Niggeratti experience from an older generation of black artists and thinkers, the development and publication of *Fire!!*, the publication of Thurman's *Infants of the Spring*, and Thurman's death.[5] Meanwhile, in the present, Perry struggles with whether to compromise his artistic vision in order to attain some degree of commercial success as well as how to negotiate his gay identity as he confronts the rejection of his parents and other black men. This struggle is most evident in scenes that take place in a black literature class Perry attends, in which the other students refuse to connect issues of sexuality and race, connections that are essential to Perry's understanding of himself and his black gay experience. Evans, himself a black gay man, describes the primary thematic effort of the film's narrative as an effort to point out the persistence of "homophobia in the Black community and racism in the gay community" (qtd. in Grant 20). The seeming incompatibilities of these two communities—and the subjects who endeavor to inhabit them—are at the center of this film and of this chapter.

An independent filmmaker, Evans struggled to bring his project to fruition, encountering difficulties particularly in funding and casting.[6] He began work on the script that would

eventually become *Brother to Brother* in 1999, undertaking research on Nugent and the Harlem Renaissance at the Schomburg Center in Harlem; the following year, the script won the Independent Feature Project's Gordon Parks Award for Screenwriting (Bunn 20). In the months after he was awarded this honor, Evans began casting the film. He explains the difficulties in casting the part of Perry Williams by describing how "it's a little more complicated for young black actors because of the hip-hop machismo mentality […] If you have a guy's tongue in your mouth, you can't go back to your hood and get respect" (qtd. in Bunn 20). Here, Evans points toward how the problem of the film—the presumed tension between black and gay in the cultural imaginary—shaped not just the content but the production of the film as well. Evans eventually cast the young straight actor Anthony Mackie, who told Evans he wanted to audition for the role of Perry in part because he thought taking on a gay role would help him "hone […his] craft." (21). Shooting began in 2001, but Evans was only able to complete a fourth of the filming before depleting his funds (Grant 20). He disbanded filming temporarily and prepared some clips to show at screenings to raise money for the film. Using these funds, he was able to re-start filming the following year. Because budget limitations meant he was not able to stage the 1920s Harlem scenes with as much accuracy as he would have liked, he depended on archival footage from the era and edited that footage together with his scenes (Bunn 21). *Brother to Brother* was accepted to Sundance film festival in 2004, where it won a special jury prize for passion in filmmaking (19). Though not widely reviewed, the reviews it did receive were largely positive.[7]

One of the central arguments of this dissertation is that nostalgia is a queer feeling that is driven by a queer relationship to temporality, an insistence on the pleasures of the past that contradicts progressive models of gay progress. In *Brother to Brother*, this nostalgia is queer in

both form and content. The form of queer nostalgia is evidenced by Perry's very literal ability to step in and out of two historical moments, to step from color film to black and white film and back again. The content of queer nostalgia takes shape as a longing for the Harlem Renaissance and for the queer social and communal forms existing there. Phrased another way, this is nostalgia that time travels. While keeping in mind the specifically queer brand of nostalgia I want to uncover and explicate throughout this project, in this chapter I argue that *Brother to Brother*'s time traveling nostalgia, however queer it may be, is racialized in ways that complicate and texture its queerness. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. famously declared that the Harlem Renaissance was "surely as gay as it was black, not that it was exclusively either of these" ("Black" 233). The argument of this chapter is akin to Gates's summary of the historical period it depicts: *Brother to Brother*'s nostalgia is surely as black as it is gay, although it may not be exclusively either of these. Reading this film will serve to explicate how, precisely, queerness and race can coproduce each other, particularly at specific historical moments and geographical locations—here, Harlem of the 1920s.

The Down Low, a Context

Alongside a study of the film's nostalgic emotional register and its queer investments, I link its nostalgia to its particular historical context of the early 21st century, a moment during which the much-discussed phenomenon of "the down low" obsessed the media and the public. Focusing attention on this myth of black sexuality that arose at the time *Brother to Brother* was conceived and created is one way I focus attention on the simultaneous racial and sexual content of this film (and attempt to do justice to that simultaneity). Ultimately, I argue that the film can

be read as one response to the pathologizing discussion of the down low circulating in popular culture. In the most basic sense, this film tells a story of the past's pleasures and the present's violences. An exploration of the myth of the down low gives shape and content to the film's present moment, a moment from which the film ardently wants its characters and viewers to depart.

The down low, a term popularized in the first few years of the twenty-first century, describes men of color who maintain straight identities in public while simultaneously pursuing sexual relationships with other men in private. The term was first deployed purportedly in order to explain rising rates of HIV diagnosis among women of color. But it is a slippery term, one not well-defined either by scholars who theorize it or epidemiologists who try to discern its connection to HIV. In my reading, the down low functions as a social and historical backdrop for *Brother to Brother*; the down low is an (unannounced) participant in the narrative the film offers about the intersectional identities of black and gay. Below, I trace a brief history of the down low, as well as responses to down low paranoia in the field of black queer studies.

In *Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies, and Denial in Black America* (2005), Keith Boykin dates the beginning of down low paranoia at sometime around 2001, although he is careful to qualify that, as a gay black man himself, the notion that black men with girlfriends and wives were having sex with other men was not a revelation to him. "By 2001," he writes, "the down low was old news to me, but for the mass media it was the beginning of a profitable period of exploration of black grief" (7). Boykin is certainly pointing to rising rates of HIV infection in black communities and to the prevailing understanding of the black family as in some way under siege (via rates of incarceration, educational inequities, uneven access to healthcare, etc). As

Boykin indicates, however, the down low entered the general public imagination around 2001, when the first major article on the phenomenon was published in *USA Today* (Sternberg) The headline reads, "The danger of living 'down low'; Black men who hide their bisexuality can put women at risk."[8] In 2003, *New York Times Magazine* published its own alarmist exposé, "Double Lives on the Down Low" (Denizet-Lewis). And in 2004, at the height of down low paranoia, Oprah Winfrey interviewed its self-appointed expert, J. L. King, in an episode titled "A Secret Sex World." King's own book, *On the Down Low*, part memoir, part pop-sociology, had been published that same year. These are the same years (2001-2004) during which Rodney Evans began work on the script that would become the film *Brother to Brother* (Bunn 21).

In these years, a number of circumstances coalesced, which together served to produce and solidify the down low as a social and cultural phenomenon. Most important among them, in 2001, the CDC calculated that fully 64% of new cases of HIV among women were among black women, and released that statistic in an official report that sparked widespread concern (Tapia *et al* 126-7). In a culture in which black sexualities were always already presumed dangerous, this data took on significant meaning. Marlon B. Ross links the rise of anxiety about the down low not only to HIV, but to "the dramatic rise in the number of black men incarcerated and released from prison" during the 1990s in combination with "the mass influence of 'gangsta rap' among white teenagers," the former of which carried the "stigma of coercive homosexuality" and the latter of which was understood as violently homophobic ("Anatomy" 42; 43).[9] Taking all these pressures together, we can begin to understand how there was no unproblematic theoretical or cultural-historical conception of black male sexuality in these years. As C. Riley Snorton explains, down low paranoia arose in a historical moment bereft of "epistemological frameworks

[…] able to address the complexity of black sexual expression" (109). This chapter argues that Evans's film both dramatizes that lack and seeks to fill it.

King's book (co-written with Karen Hunter) and television interview on *Oprah*, both much-watched and much-read by the public, did little in the way of clarification or nuance. While I hesitate to quote King, whom Boykin and others have discredited, I do so to provide some sense of how his writing participates in and encourages a sense of alarm without illuminating the issues he promises to illuminate. In one passage, he writes, "I put a face and a name to the behavior that was infecting some of our women," asserting his legitimacy to speak on the subject as well as his investment in the (heteronormative version of the) black family (11). He continues, emphasizing his participation in down low culture by a first person pronoun, then switching to the third person ostensibly in order to suggest a more objective tone: "It's called the DL—the down low—brothers who have sex with other brothers. They're not in the closet, they're behind the closet. They are so far removed from attaching themselves and what they do to the homosexual lifestyle that these men do not consider themselves gay" (11). King commits the "violations" that Ruby Tapia, Jeffrey McCune, and Jennifer Devere Brody argue characterizes much alarmist DL discourse (129). King presumes the down low is a new phenomenon; he claims to "put a face and a name" to a practice that has not been previously named or discussed. He centralizes black women's health and safety—in his words, the safety of "our women"—by portraying DL men as lacking conscience. Women are thus imagined uncomplicatedly as innocent victims "infect[ed]" by black men. His stated desire is to "protect" women but, in so doing, he strips them of agency. And, all along, he implies that black culture is

inherently homophobic by suggesting that black men on the down low are "behind the closet" and "do not consider themselves gay."[10] (In his book, King does not refer to himself as gay.)

In addition to the violations that Tapia, McCune, and Brody name, alarmist DL discourse often implies and sometimes overtly asserts that the identities of black and gay cannot co-exist. Benoit Denizet-Lewis's 2003 exposé exemplifies this failure to imagine intersectional identities. He asserts, "[the public does not] hear much about [the connection between black male same-sexualities and the AIDS epidemic], mostly because the two communities most directly affected […] – the black and gay communities – have spent the better part of two decades eyeing each other through a haze of denial or studied disinterest." Denizet-Lewis takes for granted that DL men reject gay culture because they perceive it as "white and effeminate" while understanding themselves "first and foremost as black." While his article primarily relies on interviews with self-described DL men and hence its blindspots may be attributable to the subjects themselves, the author ultimately reproduces the presumption that blackness and gayness cannot coexist. With Denizet-Lewis in mind, I argue that one additional violation that alarmist DL discourse perpetrates is to traffic in the notion that identities at once black and gay are untenable. Denizet-Lewis points to the black church, black cultures of masculinity, and the politics of mainstream black organizations in order to elucidate this untenability. However, alarmist DL discourse does nothing but lend credence to the assumption that intersectional identity is impossible. The effects of this discursive violation structure the experiences of *Brother to Brother*'s main character, Perry, and reverberate throughout the film.

Alarmist DL discourse has been met by a number of potent rejoinders, primarily from the field of black queer studies. While my argument engages the version of down low paranoia that

is embraced by a racist public and instantiated by regulatory institutions that do not value the lives and identities of black gay and bisexual men, I am likewise interested in corrections to alarmist DL discourse. On my way toward asserting that *Brother to Brother* can be understood as a rejoinder to DL discourse, I want to outline other responses that have helped to frame how the down low has been discussed within black queer studies. Briefly, there are three common rejoinders: 1. The down low does not name any new social configuration; it has a much longer history than alarmist narratives suggest; 2. The down low does not name any real social configuration; it is a myth produced by a mainstream white culture that has, over and over, failed to conceptualize black sexualities un-punishingly; and 3. The down low might best be understood as a rejection and/or creative re-fashioning of the closet, which does not function for black gay subjects in the way it does for white gay subjects.

Even as scholars (including myself) date down low paranoia from the early 2000s, many have recognized how it can be understood as a recent incarnation of a history of pathologized black sexualities. Tapia, McCune, and Brody explain how the image of the down low man arose from an earlier incarnation, the ironic stereotype of the "homo-thug" (126-7). In other contexts, the DL man has been framed as the root of the black family's dysfunction: If the infamous Moynihan Report suggested that black women were the root cause of the supposed dysfunction in black families, then the down low might be understood a reversal of that narrative, a transferral of blame from black women to black men (127). While Boykin's historical methodology is perhaps too limited, he outlines a history of men "secretly sleeping with other men since the beginning of time" from Bible stories to anecdotes about Harlem Renaissance-era jazz performers (27). In other words, as McCune phrases it, "DL men are new bodies dancing to

an old song" (74). I am convinced by arguments that position the down low as part of a longer history of "secret" sex between black men, but my argument insists on an understanding of the phenomenon that links it to a particular historical moment. Even while we can trace this longer history and even while it is intellectually and historically useful to do so, we can nevertheless say that something particular arose around the social formations of black male same-sexualities at the turn of the millennium.

If some scholars suggest that the down low is not new, others suggest it is primarily a myth created by a white media for consumption by a white public—that it is, in fact, not real. Tellingly, most of the information circulating in popular contexts about the phenomenon can be traced back to King's own self-reported experiences, which makes the phenomenon difficult to verify. Ultimately, some considerations of the down low have asked a version of the question, *Is there a there, there?* Or, as Tapia, McCune and Brody point out, popular down low discourse is "inaccessible," "invisible," ultimately "an interpretation of absence" (130). Russell K. Robinson explains, "Although DL discourse has convinced many readers that the DL is a real and significant phenomenon in the black community, *no one has ever proved* the prevalence of this practice in black communities or elsewhere. Indeed, it may be impossible to do so since the very conception of the practice entails secrecy" (1467; my emphasis). Certainly, any sexual practice that takes privacy as its central tenet will be difficult to trace.[11] However, considering whether the down low is a real phenomenon does not mean denying the ways in which its shadows and echoes are felt. Popular down low discourse has done little to illuminate whether there is a reality behind the myth, while it has done much to, in Robinson's words, "foster[] a new sexualized

stigma for black men while ignoring the compelling questions of intersectionality and identity politics prompted by" it (1469).

One final rejoinder to alarmist down low discourse insists that the down low is a queer social configuration insofar as it refashions the taken-for-granted (white) narrative of the closet. The closet has signified meaningfully not only in popular representations of gay life, but in queer theory as well. Scholars of black sexualities have recently begun troubling the centrality of the concept, showing how the closet fails to function in black gay life as it does in white gay life. Ross, in particular, has shown how the closet as conceived of by Sedgwick and Foucault, a concept so essential to "(white)queer theory," does not account for racial/ethnic others ("Beyond" 163; 170). In "claustrophilic" narratives of gay development, of which Sedgwick and Foucault are exemplary, the closet becomes "a doorway marking threshold between up-to-date fashions of sexuality and all the outmoded, anachronistic others" (163). This is a story implicitly about the "uneven development of the races from primitive darkness to civilized enlightenment" (163). Given how the closet not only fails to account for black same-sexualities but may also function as a source of race-blindness or even racism, I am sympathetic to McCune's reminder that "Black queer people have always done queer differently" and, hence, that down low identities may provide opportunities to inhabit queer sexualities not defined by the white gay mainstream (100). Boykin adds that it is not, in all cases, homosexual behavior that black men reject, but, rather, the prevailing white mainstream conceptualizations of that homosexual behavior.[12] Rather than the binaries of in/out and straight/gay, some black men deploy a "continuum of knowing" that better accommodates the way that black social networks function (Ross "Beyond" 180).

In sum, down low discourse, as it circulates in the popular imagination, traffics in punishing assumptions about black sexuality and can make those assumptions appear legitimate to some. What is worth emphasizing here, at the close of a section which offers a social and historical context for the film under consideration, is how down low discourse and the presumptions on which it is based tell us more about the consumers and purveyors of that discourse than about the subjects for whom it tries to speak. *Brother to Brother* is not overtly or obviously about the down low; rather, it is about black gay existence in a historical moment during which that existence has been rendered untenable not by silence but by the proliferation of discourse. This discourse pathologizes black sexualities, buoys the simplistic notion that black and gay can never be overlapping identity categories, and imagines itself as speaking on behalf of subjects who are rendered illegible by the very terms of the structure which the discourse itself has helped to create. In cinematic form, these are the circumstances of race and sexuality that the film dramatizes. However, while down low paranoia is a myth driven by racism and homophobia, *Brother to Brother* offers a different narrative—one that is, I will argue, neither racist nor homophobic. In Evans's imagination, nostalgia can power an anti-racist, anti-homophobic value system; further, his unexpected deployment of nostalgia runs counter to presumptions about nostalgia, which is often critiqued as a tool of racism and homophobia rather than their combatant.

Richard Bruce Nugent and the Gay Harlem Renaissance

I have been arguing that *Brother to Brother* is about a historical moment sometime around the year 2000, in which black same-sexuality was impinged on from a number of

directions, most notably the media's simplistic and pathologizing portrayal of black sexual secrecy and disease-spreading. However, this film is also about a historical moment around the year 1926, in which black same-sexuality (in certain contexts and in certain spaces) could be and was sustained even in the presence of homophobia and racism. This sustainability is corporealized in the imagined person of Richard Bruce Nugent, who acquires heroic status in the film. Interestingly, most historical and literary-critical work on Nugent positions him just as Evans does in *Brother to Brother*—exceptional among all gay Harlem Renaissance artists and writers in his openness and lack of shame around his own sexuality. I admit to my own fondness for this version of Nugent that circulates, and for a preference for it over the version literary critic Scott Herring offers, in which Nugent "refuses to acknowledge sexual identities […] and the emergent communities they fostered" (143). However, as in the case of my chapters on Whitman, Truman Capote, and Christopher Isherwood, this chapter's argument does not attempt to solidify a version of Nugent that might most closely match the "real" Nugent. Rather, I am interested in observing and tracking the critical conversation about Nugent as a way of asking how and to what ends he has been rendered heroic and, ultimately, why nostalgia coalesces so effortlessly around him. In a contemporary moment structured by the interweaving of racism and homophobia made most perceptible in down low discourse, Evans turns not just to the Harlem Renaissance—long a target of nostalgic feeling—but to Nugent in particular.

Nugent was born in Washington, D.C. on July 2, 1906; His mother was a member of the light-skinned socialite Bruce family, although she herself was not wealthy.[13] His father was a Pullman porter who died when Nugent was fourteen. That same year, Nugent's mother moved to New York to earn money to support Nugent and his younger brother, sending the two boys to

live briefly with their aunt. Nugent and his brother joined their mother later that year. However, Nugent eventually decided to become an artist rather than help support his family, at which time his mother sent him back to Washington, D.C. Nugent did not stay long. He returned to New York in 1925 with Langston Hughes, whom he had met at a salon held by the poet and playwright Georgia Douglas Johnson. Hughes introduced him to Wallace Thurman, who became his roommate. Thurman, Nugent, and the other so-called Niggeratti—Aaron Douglass, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes—published their magazine *Fire!!* in 1926, but disbanded soon after. It is these years—1925 and 1926—that are chronicled in the flashback scenes of *Brother to Brother*.

Nugent's contribution to the magazine is the story "Smoke, Lilies and Jade." Written in stream of consciousness style that merges the internal thoughts of its main character Alex with dialogue and description, the story is peppered with ellipses, which serve as all-purpose punctuation throughout. "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" has been at least partially folded into the canon of American modernist literature because it has been understood as exemplary of some of modernism's formal traits, particularly in its inventive use of ellipses. Indeed, literary critical consideration of this story primarily centers around the question of how to make sense of those curious ellipses. Joseph Allen Boone reads the ellipses as an echo of Alex's journey criss-crossing the city grid, a "modernist appropriation of urban and textual conceptions of space for protoqueer ends" (224). Writing in 1998, Boone is at pains to assert that Nugent's story prefigures queerness in the sense we have come to conceive it following the advent of queer theory—loosely, a skepticism about stable identities—but, somewhat contradictorily, he argues that the literal shape of this text provides a kind of map to Alex's identity. While the route to

self-knowledge is not fully mapped by the end of the story, Boone nonetheless implies that a gay identity is likely be at the end of it. For Boone, the moment of triumph in the narrative comes when Alex is finally able to kiss Beauty with his eyes open, a celebratory moment that marks Alex's crossing of the "ultimate barrier to self-realization" (231). Herring, responding explicitly to Boone, argues that "the elliptical gaps in Nugent's story [are] an attempt to refuse any knowledge about the self—individual or communal—and as an attempt on Nugent's part to disrupt the increasingly entrenched binary logic of modern sexual identity" (140). For Herring, the queerness of the story lies in its refusal to provide any conclusive answer about Alex's sexual identity or even any assurance that a conclusive answer is possible. Michael Cobb, in a slightly different vein, historicizes the ellipses, arguing that they function as a rejection of "[Alain] Locke's smooth racial veneer" (345). Cobb sidesteps the question of whether the ellipses reveal or conceal Alex's sexual identity, but does argue that Nugent must "break with traditional form, as well as traditional values about what counts as appropriate sentences and racial expression [in order to enable] the queer to exist in content and form at the same time" (346).

Despite its unusual form, the story's plot is relatively conventional. Early in the narrative, which is based on Nugent's own autobiography, the young protagonist Alex's father dies. His mother is perpetually disappointed in him because he refuses to find work, preferring to "think… think of everything… short disconnected thoughts… to wonder… to remember… to think and smoke" (75). The arc of the story serves to disarticulate Alex from his family of birth and join him with a community of artists and writers, stars of the New Negro Renaissance ("Carl… Mencken… Toomer… Hughes… Cullen… Wood… Cabell… oh the whole lot of them" [77]). At the same time, Alex's sexual identity develops as he pursues encounters both with a man,

Beauty, and a woman, Melva.[14] Ultimately, Alex decides that "one *can* love two at the same time" (87). Nugent's story has been cited as the first to present same-sex love between black men (Garber "Spectacle" 330).

Even though it was probably true for the biographical Nugent that, as Evans's fictional Nugent tells us, "it never really was the same" following the publication of *Fire!!*, he maintained his artistic interests. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, he continued to make art in various media, some (but not most) of which was published, and appeared in a stage play, *Porgy*, which toured in the U.S. and Britain. He was a participant in the Federal Writer's Project during the Depression and joined a dance company in the 1940s. Nugent was married between 1952 and 1969; his wife, Grace Marr, reportedly knew about his homosexuality but decided to marry him anyway. He kept a separate residence and continued to sleep with men. Their marriage ended in 1969 with Marr's suicide. Throughout the 1960s, Nugent served on the Harlem Cultural Council; during his tenure, he undertook a protest against the Metropolitan Museum of Art for their exclusion of black artists in the organizing of an exhibit entitled "Harlem on My Mind" and also helped garner political support for a new building to house the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (the same space where Rodney Evans would later undertake research for *Brother to Brother*). Beginning in the 1970s, biographers and historians began to call on Nugent to recount Harlem Renaissance history; his recollections are incorporated into David Levering Lewis's seminal *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1997). Likewise, gay historians turned to him beginning in the 1980s; his recollections are incorporated into the now-canonical documentary *Before Stonewall* (1986). Throughout his life, Nugent was an unrepentant bohemian. During the 1970s, he lived primarily in his art studio (which was closed on the weekends), finally moving to

an apartment in Hoboken, New Jersey, where he lived until his death from heart failure in 1987. His heir is Thomas Wirth, who collected Nugent's work in an anthology published in 2002, *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance*. *Gentleman Jigger*, Nugent's unpublished novel written in the 1920s and 1930s, was finally published in 2008.

There is limited literary critical and historical consideration of Nugent, who is deemed a "minor" figure of the Harlem Renaissance. What there is tends to align with the version of him that Evans promotes: unique in his sexual openness, singular in his unwillingness to apologize or conform, and a vitally important site for understanding how gay and black identities can and have overlapped. Eric Garber describes him as "openly homosexual throughout the renaissance period but […] seldom rebuffed because of it" ("Tain't" 15-6). Gregory Woods puts it more baldly: "Gay maverick Richard Bruce Nugent […] was the exception" (139). Essex Hemphill likewise singularizes Nugent: "[Nugent's] work was considerably more daring, judged by the standards of his day, than were those of his more closeted Renaissance contemporaries, none of whom dared risk publishing homoerotic literature for fear of falling from grace" (xlv). Gates refers to Nugent as "boldly and proudly gay […] the most openly homosexual of the Harlem Renaissance Writers" (Foreword xi). Wirth's echoes Gates's summary: "Nugent was the first African-American to write from a self-declared homosexual perspective; his work therefore occupies an honored place in the now-burgeoning literature of the black gay male" (Introduction 1). This sample demonstrates the larger trend: Although not widely known, Nugent has been canonized, installed as the standard-bearer for historical gay black identity. Recall the title of Wirth's 2002 anthology, which celebrates Nugent as a "gay rebel." A. B. Christa Schwarz's book, *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (2003), both argumentatively and structurally

insists that Nugent stands out from the other "gay voices" of her title. Nugent's "voice," while no more or less gay than the voices of Thurman, Hughes, McKay, and Cullen, nonetheless serves as the subject of the capstone chapter to the project as a whole. His voice, she insists, is "an alternative to those audible in the works created by other Renaissance protagonists" (5). Essential to and alongside this circulating understanding of Nugent as singularly and exceptionally gay is the notion that, as Gates explains, in "link[ing] the black world of the Harlem Renaissance with the gay world of bohemian New York" during his lifetime by traversing back and forth between the two, Nugent was "the first writer who directly raised the issue of what being black and being gay might have to do with each other" (Foreword xii). Rather than a simple suggestion that it is possible to be both black and gay—which, as I have argued, is a concept that continues to meet with some resistance—Nugent offers, vis-à-vis Gates, a model for understanding how the two identities can be inherently, perhaps inextricably, linked.

A minority of critics and historians take the opposing perspective. James Kelley, writing about Nugent as an example of a literary decadent, insists that a general disapproval of homosexuality existed in Nugent's moment, and that all the Harlem Renaissance figures, Nugent included, "express[ed] their shared desires in carefully shaped and frequently coded ways" (505). Similarly, Herring refers to Wirth's version of Nugent as "revisionis[m]" and, instead, presents Nugent as opposed to the stabilization of identity and disinterested in community formation (144). Herring writes that Nugent "refuse[d] the hetero/homo binary that propels desire into discernable categories and knowable communities" (139). Interestingly, then, Herring's version of Nugent shares some traits with the DL figure who undertakes a queer revision of the closet by foreclosing rather than granting knowledge. Kelley and Herring, however, are not representative

of the majority of criticism on Nugent. Rather, the widespread presumption has been that Nugent, even in the 1920s, was never closeted, at least in the way the closet is understood now, and that he was therefore, in some sense, openly gay. This is the narrative that Garber, Woods, Hemphill, Wirth, Gates, and Schwarz offer, and this is the historical narrative that Evans depends on in his film.

Nugent himself might offer a more complicated narrative. In a 1983 interview with Wirth, Nugent explains,

> You see, I am a homosexual. I have never been in what they call the closet. It has never occurred to me that there is anything to be ashamed of. And it never occurred to me that it was anybody's business but mine. You know, like that good old Negro song, "Ain't Nobody's Business What I Do." And the times were very different then. Everybody did whatever they wanted to do.

On the one hand, Nugent assents to the categorization that history has determined for him—homosexual—and he denies outright that shame should accompany such a categorization. But, on the other hand, he draws a line between the past and the present, suggesting that "times were very different then," perhaps implying something like what scholars of sexuality have long argued: any attempt to correspond contemporary sexual identities with those in the past is doomed to fail. Nugent's statement may also align with what black queer scholars have argued in recent years—that the closet model does not function when thinking about sexual secrecy among black men. Ultimately, *How openly gay was Richard Bruce Nugent during the years we refer to as the Harlem Renaissance?* is a question that has become increasingly important not only for scholarship, but for politics as well. It is not, however, a question of concern for this project. More important to my argument is that, whatever the historical reality was, Nugent has been canonized as black, gay, and proud to be both. This is the historical narrative offered in the

present, and this is the narrative to which nostalgia attaches. *Brother to Brother* reflects this black, gay narrative of Nugent even as it plays with sexual and racial ambiguity in scenes we might provisionally mark as queer, which are discussed in more detail below.

Secondary but vital to the film's nostalgia for Nugent is a generalized nostalgia for the time and space in which he lived, Harlem in the 1920s. Historians Eric Garber, George Chuancey, and Kevin Mumford write about the struggles of being gay and black in Harlem in this period: familial rejection, criminal convictions, general cultural disapproval.[15] However, in each historian's account, this space and time is nonetheless rendered primarily in positive terms. Chauncey notes that, in Harlem above 125th Street, "lesbians and gay men were wholly accepted or even predominant" and that "gay life 40 years before Stonewall was more highly developed—and happier—than is commonly acknowledged" (30; 32). Garber reveals how "a homosexual subculture, uniquely Afro-American in substance, began to take shape in New York's Harlem" ("Spectacle" 318). Mumford refers to Harlem as "a site of homosexual leisure" where there existed a "tolerance for the marginalized among people with a long history of exclusion" (84). Despite Kelley's caution that Harlem during this period should not be imagined as a utopia, many historical depictions focus on exactly those qualities of the space and place: freedom of artistic expression and fluid and open sexualities, in particular. Like Nugent himself, Harlem is positioned—and positioned in positive terms—at the intersection of black and gay identity. In Garber's and Mumford's commentaries, the two identities are conceptually linked. The gay subculture of Harlem was "uniquely Afro-American." Because Harlemites were accustomed to accepting marginalized people, "homosexual leisure" flourished there. The black, gay subculture

described by Garber and Mumford could not be more distinct from the version of black same-sexualities apparent in DL discourse.

This "uniquely Afro-American" gay subculture, this tolerant "site of homosexual leisure," drew white gay artists and writers during these years as well. Notable among them was Carl Van Vechten, sometimes referred to as the patron of the Harlem Renaissance. Van Vechten, author of the controversial *Nigger Heaven* (1926), was also a photographer. He famously photographed dozens of the Harlem Renaissance stars and, due to his fascination with, attraction to, and representation of black bodies, lives, and cultures, his work is often cited as exemplary of modernist primitivism.[16] Admittedly, Evans's film, like Van Vechten's photographs and novels, is liable to charges of primitivism. The subjects of this film, after all, are black writers and artists who participated in not only non-normative sexual practices but non-normative economic and aesthetic practices as well, all of which the film catalogs and celebrates. Marianna Torgovnick's argument about how the figure of the primitive functions in modernity—as childlike, "libidinous, irrational" mystics—incorporates this reminder: "Those who study or write about the primitive usually begin by defining it as a different from (usually opposite to) the present" (8). There is undoubtedly something about nostalgia, also defined in opposition to the present, that lends itself to primitivism, at least insofar as it is racialized, as it is in this case. Valerie Rohy has shown how the analogizing of racial and sexual difference has always taken place on the grounds of temporality, specifically scientific understandings of blackness and homosexuality as atavistic, archaic, and primal—in Rohy's words, "the supposed arrested development of homosexuals and the imagined primitivism of people of color" (5). By one rubric, then, Evans's recent celebration

of black queer sexual life in the past is not so different from, for example, Van Vechten's modernist celebration of black sexual life as a remnant of the past.

The film, however, offers a counterpoint to the kinds of primitivist projects fundamental to modernism. One scene depicts Van Vechten behind a camera, photographing Thurman and his lover, the white Canadian Harold Jackman. Van Vechten poses one shot in which Thurman holds a pointed object (a knife or a short spear) over the midsection of Jackman, who is draped, awkwardly immobile, over a piece of furniture, a pose that undoubtedly calls up both the erotics and the fears of miscegenation. This threatening tableau, however, is disrupted by the young Nugent, who sneaks into the room while Van Vechten's back is turned, slips behind the camera and snaps a photo of Van Vechten. Nugent's mischief behind the camera effectively turns Van Vechten's primitivist project on its head. If, as Torgovnick and others have argued, primitivism in art ultimately reflects the artist rather than the so-called primitive, this short scene dramatizes a similar critique. While some queer nostalgic projects may be undergirded by primitivist discourses and images, and Evans's film is certainly aware of that potentiality, this scene suggests that *Brother to Brother* subverts any easy alignment of nostalgia and primitivism.

***Brother to Brother*'s Queer Nostalgia**

In some respects, *Brother to Brother* is a prototypical coming-of-age story: A young black artist and college student attempts to articulate his identity as it is comprised sexually, culturally, and racially. However, social constraints render this articulation of identity almost impossibly difficult. In more specific terms, Perry's struggle is the problem the down low myth tries to account for: how to negotiate membership in two contested identity categories that are

presumed to be in tension. The film illustrates this problem in part through a reimagining of the historical conflict between James Baldwin and Eldridge Cleaver. In this scene, Perry presents a short video clip to his classmates in a course on black literature and history. In the clip, Cleaver, the black heterosexual activist and early leader of the Black Panther Party, and Baldwin, the black gay novelist and social critic, debate whether there is space within the movement for racial equality for gays and lesbians. Baldwin, ventriloquizing Perry's fears and anxieties, recalls being "spat on" by other black people because of his sexuality, and explains, "When white people criticized me, it sent me into heated clear articulation, but when black people criticized me, it really made me want to break down and cry."[17] The climax of the scene comes when Cleaver angrily shouts at Baldwin, "You let the white man fuck you in the ass! What does that make you? That makes you the lowest scum on the earth!" Cleaver's criticism of Baldwin, leveled here in strikingly graphic terms intended to offend Baldwin, calls up the history of racism in America: If Baldwin can consent to receptive anal sex with a white man, allowing a white man to dominate him sexually (as Cleaver sees it), he therefore must be not only an insufficient man but also an insufficient black man. Cleaver and Baldwin's exchange stands in for what I have been arguing is Perry's central conflict in the film. Showing this film to his class in an effort to express this conflict is one way Perry attempts to negotiate his identity, or at least to carve a space for it within existing communities. That he attempts this negotiation in the space of the classroom is noteworthy, as it dramatizes how the 2000s academic moment of intersectionality may open up these questions around race, sexuality, and gender—and how they coproduce each other—but that academic intersectionality may not be enough to bring about the kind of change necessary to make Perry's intersectional identity tenable in any broad sense. The community represented in

this classroom scene is comprised of his (straight, black) classmates, who reject Perry's insistence on thinking race and sexuality alongside each other. The writers he encounters in the past, outside the confines of academic discourse, conceptualize intersectionality much more readily than do the contemporary college students. During an earlier class session, when Perry first attempts to broach the subject of Baldwin's homosexuality, a female student comments, "I didn't even know James Baldwin was gay," while Rashan, Perry's most vocal combatant, remarks angrily, "If you like to take it up the ass, that's your business. I don't see why we need to hear about it in this class." Pointing precisely to Perry's problem, a third classmate insists, "This class is about *black* political struggle," audibly emphasizing the racial component of the class, implying that a class about race must have nothing to do with issues of sexuality. For most of the film, Perry is locked in the conflict illustrated by these two classroom scenes: his intersectional identity makes impossible the kinds of community he desires. His attempts to bridge his race and sexuality, to put the two identities into conversation and relationship with each other, are consistently met with resistance.

However, in contrast, and I would argue vitally importantly, Nugent's 1920s moment as depicted in the film makes available exactly those pleasures, communities, and opportunities inaccessible to Perry in the present. In this way, *Brother to Brother* negotiates black gay identity at the turn of the millennium—an identity category under siege by those who would seek to pathologize—in and through nostalgia for the gay Harlem Renaissance. Or, to put it another way, nostalgia for the gay Harlem Renaissance is one way out of the problem of an intersectional identity that feels impossible. Further, nostalgia is the way out preferred by the narrative and formal features of Evans's film. Through nostalgia, Evans makes available a model for culture-

sustaining communities of black gay men in the present, comprised not only of black gay men living now but also those who lived in the past. Indeed, the film is a particularly rich text for thinking about queer community in the past because community is what most obviously differentiates Perry's contemporary struggles to unite his black and gay identities from the younger Nugent's similar efforts. In the context of the debate about the down low myth and the anxious reportage that surrounds it, *Brother to Brother* takes up the question of whether the identities of black and gay contradict one another: Perry's black classmates are uninformed about and/or hostile to questions of sexuality, while the young Nugent and his friends are attacked by older black writers and activists for perceived failures of sexual morality. However, what animates the film's nostalgic impulse is that, while Perry longs for a community of individuals who share both identities and/or who do not perceive the two identities as inherently contradictory, the young Nugent possesses just such a community. Unlike the mythic DL man, depicted at once as a sex predator and a hapless victim of the closet, we observe in *Brother to Brother* how intersectional identities can be sustained and, further, we know they can be sustained because they have been sustained.

The film presents its investment in nostalgia through a scene in which the older Nugent takes Perry on a tour of Harlem, now much changed from when Nugent lived there in the 1920s. As Nugent guides Perry through the abandoned Niggeratti Manor, he describes his life at that time: "If it seems like we worked hard, lord knows we played even harder." The pair come to a closed bedroom door in the old house and press their ears to the door, listening in on the past. Within the space of a rapid camera cut, we find ourselves in a flashback scene occurring inside the room and backward in time. The young Nugent hides under a bed, eavesdropping on a sexual

encounter between Thurman and his white male lover. When the couple in bed discovers Nugent underneath them, all three laugh as Thurman's lover chases Nugent out of the bedroom and through the house. Thurman comments, before walking into the living room to find that his lover has pinned Nugent to the floor under a pillow, "[We] share everything else around here, why not the men?" The blurring of friendship and sex, of public and private, of black and white, marks the scene as queer. There is a sense of joy in this moment; sexual and racial difference is both unremarkable and celebrated.

That this film celebrates the queer content of the Harlem Renaissance differentiates it from other similar recreations of that historical moment. Dickel argues that a set of texts about the Harlem Renaissance produced in the 1980s and 1990s "erase[s] […] racial and sexual ambiguity [in order to] construct[] a distinct black gay identity as a strategy to counter homophobia within black communities and racism with the white dominated gay community" (109). While the Harlem Renaissance and its artistic products are rife with queer potential, Dickel asserts, later reimaginings of the period and its artists work to de-queer the past in service to a political project in the present. The primary texts of Dickel's analysis are the film *Looking for Langston* and Steven Corbin's novel *No Easy Place to Be* (1989). Attending to *Brother to Brother*, we perceive a slightly different political investment. Evans's film, which Dickel discusses only briefly, lingers on and even highlights the kinds of racial and sexual ambiguity widely understood as queer.

This celebration of ambiguity is made overt in the film's rent party scene, which is also the site of Evans's most creative filmmaking technique. Here, Perry and the older Nugent are no longer standing outside listening in on history; they are dropped cinematically into the black and

white scene, walking among the partygoers. Indeed, when the camera initially scans the room, it is difficult to pick out Perry and Nugent from the crowd. In these moments, the film depicts the Niggeratti Manor as a utopia where white and black people dance together, men dance together, men sometimes wear women's clothing and vice versa, men kiss and have sex with each other, and no identity is under siege. As the scene ends, Thurman, Hurston, Hughes, and the young Nugent pose for a photo that captures their deep affection for each other and their shared social vision. Perry and the older Nugent observe with expressions that indicate the combination of longing and bittersweet happiness that characterizes nostalgia. The photo-taking scene recalls Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley's argument that photography is one of the forms of art that "reach[es] us more directly […] than others" (935). This photograph—which, as far as I can tell, does not recreate any actual historical photograph taken of the Niggeratti—lends to the film a documentary quality, a kind of indexicality that evidences a longing for the photographic record that it creates.

These moments in the film, in which the past and present come into close contact—a seamless shift through a doorway into the past as the present listens, a time-traveling scene that depicts a complete merging of present and past—are where the film most ardently insists on nostalgia as its primary emotional register. Likewise, it is in these scenes that nostalgia prevails not just topically, but formally as well. The Niggeratti Manor, which serves as a setting for some of the film's contemporary as well as historical scenes, is an abandoned ruin in the present: disused, dark, and decayed. The flashback scenes filmed in black and white reanimate the past and ask the viewer to understand it nostalgically, as distinct from the present and in some ways idealized. The use of black and white film insists on a conversation about nostalgia and, perhaps

not always, but at least in this case, aims to inspire nostalgia in the audience. After all, the flashback scenes depict the older Nugent's memories of a largely positive period of his life. Paul Grainge argues that, during the 1990s, black and white filmmaking grew in popularity precisely because it allowed viewers to access what he calls "an affective economy of pastness" (37). Black and white filmmaking, then, is "an aesthetic mode of nostalgia, […] used to establish and legitimate particular kinds of memory in American cultural life" (3). The kinds of memory to which he refers here hold off, to whatever extent possible, and attempt to ameliorate a sense of lost national identity in the wake of multiculturalism and globalization (10). Although it would be outside the parameters of the present discussion to think through how Perry's crisis of identity may or may not be implicated in a nationalist project, I want to underline how these particular scenes in the Niggeratti Manor enact Grainge's central argument—that black and white film makes available, by its form, a sense of pastness to viewers living in the present. When Perry and the older Nugent share the scene with the Niggeratti Manor residents and partygoers, they, too, are filmed in black and white. Their bodies blend with rather than stand apart from the other bodies in the room; the unremarkable clothing they wear is suited to time travel—buttoned shirts and plain slacks. Indeed, Perry and Nugent's distance from the past thins to imperceptibility here. If Grainge suggests we are both viewer and participant when we watch black and white film—accessing the past in order to think through our own identities in the present—then Perry's viewing and participation can be understood as emblematic of Grainge's formal argument.

Perry's journey to the Niggeratti Manor thus reverses accepted film convention. If Dorothy escapes her bland, black and white, Kansas life to enter a magical alternate world of rich vibrant color, Perry must enter the past—through black and white film—to locate both queer

possibility and a less contested home for black gay identity. I hesitate to link queerness, lockstep, to any formal or aesthetic feature, but if queerness is understood, at some level, as a skepticism to and playfulness with accepted binaries, then *Brother to Brother*'s use of black and white film certainly qualifies. Time is lengthened in these black and white scenes, which linger on the events of each of the rooms of the Manor as the camera moves through the apartment. Unlike Dorothy, neither Perry nor Nugent expresses any desire to go home. (And, in fact, once the time traveling has ended and they have returned to the present, Perry and Nugent remain at the manor, conversing as they sit on the floor in the hallway.) In addition to black and white flashbacks from Nugent's memory, in addition to archival footage deployed throughout the film, Perry very literally enters the past. However, this formal innovation is intricately linked to the content of the scenes—Perry observes with interest, with longing, his reaction a mirror of the one the viewer is presumed to be having. Dorothy undertakes a dangerous journey in order to return home to Kansas, to black and white, but Perry does not desire to escape and return to the Technicolor present, and neither does the viewer. In these scenes, Evans deploys filmic form to emphasize a nostalgic preference for the past on which the film's characters, dialogue, and storyline insist. Throughout, black and white scenes open rather than close possibility, and formally evidence the skepticism to teleology that the film's narrative renders at the level of its content.

Not all black and white scenes are uncomplicatedly positive, however. Those that are not positive are generally of two kinds: scenes that draw parallels between the historical moment of Nugent's youth and the historical moment of Perry's and scenes that singularize Nugent, setting him apart from the other Niggeratti by lending texture to his particular experiences and personality. For example, in an effort to parallel the two historical moments, the film shows

Nugent cruising for sex in public bathrooms and, later, shows Perry going to a bathhouse for anonymous sex. One notable scene of parallel depicts Hurston and Thurman visiting an editor who asks them to change both the content and style of their work in order to satisfy white audiences—in Hurston's case, to soften the dialect so white readers can better understand the text and, in Thurman's case, to add scenes highlighting the "danger, sex, and violence" that the editor insists readers want from "Harlem stories."[18] Perry's interaction with an agent at his art show echoes this scene; the agent tells Perry how successful he could be if he could "approach the same themes in a more accessible way." In a scene intending to singularize Nugent's experiences rather than draw historical parallels, Nugent argues with Hughes because Nugent refuses to confront Thurman with an accusation of plagiarism.[19] In another, Nugent has a visceral and negative reaction to the darkness of Thurman's skin tone, evidencing his own prejudices. For my purposes, these anomalies are telling in that, rather than complicating the film's larger nostalgic impulses, they instead underline the historical narrative on which that nostalgia depends—in other words, the anomalies do not suggest a progressive version of history in which "it gets better," but rather, a version of history in which the violences of the past are not necessarily any worse or even qualitatively different than the violences of the present. Just as in the past, black artists in the present are expected to compromise individual artistic vision for commercial success within a market in which white tastes prevail. Likewise, intraracial prejudice existed in the past, just as it does in the present, although with slightly different valences.

The style of one of the film's anomalous scenes is worth noting alongside its thematic content. This section of the film's flashback story narrates how, after the release of *Fire!!,* the larger New Negro movement rejected the Niggeratti as too radical. Suddenly, Hurston, Thurman,

and Nugent are onscreen, standing around a metal trashcan with an angry group of black readers who are yelling about the inappropriateness of the magazine's subject matter while burning copies of it in the trashcan. The Niggeratti debate with the protesters, insisting on the importance of the magazine as a voice of the younger generation. The scene begins in medias res, so the crowd, both Niggeratti and their protesters, seem to appear from nowhere. Further, the scene looks and sounds as if it were filmed on a stage or in an empty room, with minimal scenery, props, or lighting. The actors' voices echo in the space, underlining the dreamlike, illusory atmosphere. Unlike the other flashback scenes in the film, which, despite being in black and white, are crowded with objects that give shape to the spaces—tables, chairs, couches, pillows, beds, cups, etc.—the space of this scene feels empty, as if to pantomime a setting more than create one. It may be a street corner, or a shed, or a factory floor; there is no way to tell. Stylistically, then, this scene insists on its difference from the broader nostalgic tone of the rest of the film. It recounts the particular experience of rejection that the young black Harlem writers endured when their work was banned or burned by members of the black community. This scene's only explicit parallel to the present is in Nugent's insistence that "family […] is the core stuff," analogizing the black community to a family, which causes Perry to recall his own rejection from his literal family. The formal features of the scene indicate its uniqueness within the thematic interests of the film as a whole. Ultimately, by turning away from nostalgic feeling in this anomalous scene, the nostalgia of the rest of the film reads as more complex and nuanced. While the film argues that black gay identity in the particular past of the Harlem Renaissance was often a space of possibility and freedom, it does not insist that this was necessarily always the case.

In general, however, the black gay identity Perry is able to access through Nugent's recollections of the past and his own time-travelling visits to the Niggeratti Manor contrasts sharply with the black gay identity he is offered in the present, an identity that the film presents as unsustainable. In the present, his identity is rejected by his parents, who throw him out of their home, repeatedly misunderstood by his best friend, who suggests that Perry should date only other black gay men (although none seem to exist in the world of the film), and denied by his classmates, who take up Cleaver's, rather than Baldwin's, position on racial equality. Perry's white lover, Jim, is no more helpful. Lying in bed after sex, Jim tells Perry, "I love your skin […] And your lips […] You have the sweetest black ass I have ever seen." Upon hearing this, Perry's eyes open abruptly and a look of disappointed frustration passes over his face. He quickly gets out of bed, dresses, gathers his things, and leaves, telling Jim that he is "late" and "[has] to be somewhere." We get the sense that, in many ways, Perry is correct: he is "late." He is eighty years too late to participate in the kinds of queer sites and moments he observes when he steps back in time. Later, Perry recounts Jim's comments to his best friend Marcus, and Marcus immediately describes them as "racist bullshit." In contrast to the sexual relationships between white and black men at the Niggeratti Manor (like the playful moment between Thurman, his lover, and Nugent), which are depicted in generally positive ways, Jim's racial tokenizing becomes even more troubling. As Perry phrases it when he breaks up with Jim, "Do you know how many white guys I've met who don't give a shit about what's going on in my mind, but only want to sleep with me because they want some sweet black ass or some big black dick?" The narrative arc of this sexual relationship—Perry's only sexual relationship in the film—thus embodies a more general difficulty in living black same-sexualities, a difficulty that frames much

discourse regarding the down low. Robinson, writing about the social circumstances that undergird an American culture in which black gay and bisexual men are accused of sexual secrecy and punished for honesty, explains that a black man seeking a sexual encounter with another man at a predominantly white gay bar or club is "likely to feel like a token and be either shunned or fetishized, depending on how he performs blackness" (1496). We may applaud Perry's refusal to "perform blackness" in the way Jim expects and demands, but we likewise have to acknowledge how that refusal determines Perry's romantic and sexual opportunities. Indeed, Jim is the only white man in Perry's immediate social orbit, and likewise he is the only man in Perry's social orbit who is romantically interested in other men. Keeping in mind the limitations placed on his sexual and romantic life as well as the inaccessibility of a black gay community within the film, we can begin to understand how the film presents the intertwined oppressions that structure Perry's experience in the present.

At the climax of the film, in a heightened example of how his identity is portrayed as unsustainable, Perry is assaulted by a group of his black classmates led by Rashan. In the present, in color, in the presumptively progressive moment of turn-of-the-millennium New York, Perry suffers a brutal attack. Four men encircle him and kick him to the ground, calling him "faggot" and "bitch-ass cocksucker." As the attack continues, Rashan stands apart from the group, watching. After several moments pass, he calls to the other four to stop. They do, and he walks up to Perry, bends down, and puts out his lit cigarette in Perry's face. Despite living in a supposedly "better," more enlightened historical moment, Perry suffers for his identity in a way that neither the fictional Nugent does nor the actual Nugent did. Recalling my argument about the increased acceptance of Whitman's cocksucking in the previous chapter, it may seem curious

that a behavior so violently rejected in the world of *Brother to Brother* would seem so acceptable in the world of contemporary Whitman representations, not so historically far from this film's moment. There are two linked answers to this question, one having to do with race and one having to do with HIV/AIDS. The figure of Whitman is characterized by its indisputable whiteness, a position of privilege albeit compromised by queerness. At the same time, Whitman's cocksucking may register to some as safe, sanitized, and nonthreatening because the poet lived—and, presumably, though not indisputably, had sex—long before HIV/AIDS. In other words, the figure of Whitman is immune from the kinds of narratives that circulate around black queer subjects such as Perry. This is one reason why, I argue, we never see the angry townspeople in *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman,* despite their anachronistic comments about "nancy boys," putting out a lit cigarette on Whitman's face.

Tracing this symbolic system in *Brother to Brother*—cigarette, flame, and smoke—through three different contexts helps illustrate the comparison that the film draws between the past and the present. In "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," smoke marks freedom and imaginative possibilities for the main character: "Alex puffed contentedly on his cigarette … he was hungry and comfortable […] funny how the smoke seemed to climb up that ray of sunlight … went up the slant just like imagination … was imagination blue" (76). Smoking, which occupies Alex throughout the story, is what he does instead of working productively to engage with normative models of economic success and familial connection. Cigarette smoke is the backdrop of his modernist, queer rebellion against the family and capitalism. We find him smoking when the story opens; his father has died and his mother wants him to get a job to support the family. Later, cigarette smoke enables Alex's sexual relationship with the Hispanic man he calls

"Beauty." In this proto-cruising scene, Alex hears a man behind him, "walk[ing] music" in time with his own footsteps (81). Alex wants to speak to the man, but cannot. Beauty speaks first, and their encounter begins with Beauty's request for a "fósforo" (81). When Beauty "[blows] a cloud of smoke … Alex [feels] like singing" because "the stranger [knows] the magic of blue smoke also" (81-2). In Nugent's story, then, cigarette smoke acquires intensely positive queer connotations; so, too, does it for the older Nugent in the film, who quotes from his story, reciting "truly smoke was like imagination" early in the film, when he first meets Perry (78). In *Brother to Brother*'s 1920s scenes, cigarette smoke registers in similarly positive ways. Smoke encircles the guests in the utopic space of the rent party. Thurman smokes while he writes, after sex, and during meals with the other Niggeratti. In one scene, Hurston transgresses social convention and lights up a cigarette on the street while walking with Nugent. Nugent at first tries to stop her, but ultimately decides, "It's not as if [he has] some stellar reputation to protect." Hurston, smoking a cigarette, and Nugent walk arm in arm, enjoying the stares of the people who pass. In both Nugent's original story and in the black and white flashbacks depicted in *Brother to Brother*, smoke enables creativity, independence, and connections among people. At one level, what these scenes register is nostalgia for historical moment before our neoliberal discourses on "health." Perry does not smoke, and neither does the older Nugent. In Perry's turn-of-the-millenium moment, smoke, aside from being rejected for its health risks, disables Perry's creativity and independence and forecloses his connections with others. Following the attack, he does not leave his dorm room for a week, missing his appointment to paint with Nugent. The original story's symbolic object denoting possibility and transgression and enabling aesthetic beauty, is rendered, in the present, a weapon, an instrument of violence.

In the present, a weapon; in the past, an artistic tool: This chapter has explored a set of unexpected contrasts across historical moments. At the same time, it has explicated a queer model for thinking about the relationship between the past and the present that denies the progress narratives of the gay and lesbian mainstream. We observe Perry, mired in a social context that produces and sustains punishing discourses about the intersections of his race and sexuality made most overt in contemporary narratives of the down low, longing to escape to a different time and context. Thus, this film dramatizes a particularly queer relationship to time. Perry does not locate possibility in a utopic science fiction scene of the future; he turns backward to the past, nostalgically. Subsequent chapters in this project will continue to think through how nostalgia figures in contemporary relationships to queer history. All chapters, whether exploring uncomplicated or fraught versions of nostalgic feeling, will linger on productive encounters between the present and the queer past.

In *Brother to Brother*, this kind of encounter is most explicitly dramatized at the end of the film. After Nugent asks Perry if he will pose for a painting and Perry agrees, they return to the run-down Niggeratti Manor, where Nugent stands behind an easel. As music plays in the background, the scene captures the developing outlines of Perry's face on the canvas—first a simple pencil sketch that, through a time-lapsed sequence, develops into a likeness of Perry. Partway through the scene, the camera frame switches from the portrait of Perry that Nugent painted to Perry himself, standing at the easel, then to Nugent sitting on the chair posing for Perry. The reversal occurs within only a few seconds, and a seamless effect is created. When we see the final product of Perry's efforts, the painting stands in front of a fireplace next to the one Nugent made of Perry. The face of each man looks slightly upward and toward the other.

This artistic symbiosis, this relationship to the queer past, enables Perry's identity rather than forecloses it. It would be a simplification to argue that *Brother to Brother* ends happily—Nugent dies, after all—but I want to conclude by citing one of Perry's final statements, delivered in voiceover as he walks along a beach, scattering Nugent's ashes. "Through him," Perry says, "I learned the complexity of what was inside me was also outside, if I was willing to look deeper." Evans's film was conceived of and takes place during a historical moment in which this very complexity of black gay identity is denied in favor of a social and cultural narrative that can demand the fracturing of black gay identities. What Perry learns, through the nostalgia that congeals around the figure of Nugent, is to linger in the complexity of his intersectional identity in order to sidestep the punishing framework that we observe in the discourse about the down low. Or, in more general terms, this film shows us how the past and present can exist in a relationship of mutual creation that is sympathetic, reparative, and loving, and perhaps preferable to the ways that the present might imagine itself on its own terms.

[1] *Fire!!* was conceived as a response by young black writers and artists to Alain Locke's more conventional *Opportunity*. *Fire!!* only published one issue, copies of which are extremely rare. However, Nugent gave his personal copy of the magazine to his heir, Thomas Wirth, who founded Fire!! Press in 1982 with Nugent's support. The press sells inexpensive reproductions of the magazine through its website, firepress.com.

[2] Simon Dickel claims that *Brother to Brother* is set in the 1980s. He arrives at this conclusion seemingly solely because the real Nugent died in 1987. However, in a filmmaker's statement written in 2005, Evans explains, "The film draws parallels between the early phase of Bruce's life and the contemporary struggles of Perry, who as a young, gay, African American artist has to grapple with similar issues of racism and homophobia in the present-day culture" ("Brother to Brother"). Here, Evans clarifies that the film is indeed set around the time it was made ("contemporary," "present-day"), the very end of the 1990s or beginning of the 2000s. "Niggeratti" is a term of self-identification that the *Fire!!* contributors themselves coined, "an irreverent take-off on the pretentiously literate white audience for whose enlightenment the older impresarios (Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Charles S. Johnson, and Alain Locke) were showcasing African American talent" (Wirth *Gay Rebel* 13).

There is some debate about the spelling of the term; I use Nugent's preferred spelling of "Niggeratti" rather than Hughes's preferred spelling, "Niggerati" (Wirth *Gay Rebel* 273).

[3] On queerness as risk, see J. Jack Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place*, where 'queer time' is defined in part as a reaction against normative values of safety and longevity. On queerness as excess, see Lee Edelman's *No Future*, in which queerness is linked with a kind of jouissance outside the social and Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Binds*, in which queerness is about collecting the "debris" of history.

[4] In contradiction to the contrast he offers later, Dickel implicitly collapses *Brother to Brother*'s thematic project with that of *Looking for Langston* in his introduction, arguing that both films "construct […] a cultural tradition that constitutes black gay identity" in the present (1).

[5] A typical "rent party" was essentially part house party, part fundraiser—a large gathering of friends at which bathtub gin would be on sale, proceeds going toward the rent payment on the house or apartment.

[6] Evans's only other feature film is *The Happy Sad* (2013). Shorter films include the autobiographical *Close to Home* (1998), as well as *The Unveiling* (1996) and *Two Encounters* (1999). One short film, *Billy & Aaron* (2009), recounts the life of Billy Strayhorn, an openly gay black jazz composer from the 1940s. Evans's current project is a feature-length version of this story.

[7] Natasha Grant calls the film "a gem of a movie that should not (and cannot) be easily dismissed" (41). She describes it as "extraordinarily brave, uncompromising, witty, and riveting" (20). "A well-acted work of grace and depth," declares Kevin Thompson. Critics praise the filmmaker as well: Evans "heralds the emergence of an exciting new voice in black filmmaking,

a man willing to look deeply into culture and mores to gain insight into problems that refuse to go away," Kirk Honeycutt writes.

[8] Two scholars provide earlier dates for the inception of discourse and anxiety around the down low. Marlon B. Ross dates popular cultural attention to the phenomenon at the publication of E. Lynn Harris's *Invisible Life*, which was self-published in 1991 and corporately published in 1994 ("Anatomy" 41). C. Riley Snorton writes, without further explanation, that "[s]ince the mid-1990s, we have witnessed the ascension of the 'down low'" (108). In the present chapter, I want to insist on a circa-2000 genesis for the phenomenon (in its present iteration) because I am primarily interested in pathologizing deployments of down low discourse from outside black queer or gay communities. In other words, the mainstream news articles I cite may provide a better sense of how and when the notion of the down low spread than the publication of a novel "marketed primarily to African American urban readers" (Ross "Anatomy" 41).

[9] Ross argues that the figure of the sensitive "straight black sissy" arose alongside the DL figure as a preventative measure against the prevailing narratives of increasing homosexuality and increasing homophobia in black culture (44).

[10] The 2001 *USA Today* article quotes heavily from an interview with King and, like King's own book, traffics in alarmist DL discourse and is likewise guilty of the violations Tapia, McCune, and Brody outline. For example, one DL man quoted in the article became infected with HIV only after his son was born and his relationship with his ex-wife was over; the two "innocents," the article seems to suggest, were spared.

[11] Further, not only is there a lack of evidence to support the notion that the down low is "a real and significant social phenomenon," likewise is there a lack of evidence to support that the down low, if indeed it does exist, is responsible for rising rates of HIV among black women (Boykin 7). In fact, Robinson cites a study that indicates that knowledge of HIV status among black men does seem to change sexual behavior and that, rather than the DL archetype of a conscience-less spreader of disease, it is in fact structural and institutional inequities that have caused HIV rates to rise in black communities (1526). A number of articles on the down low have attended to the ways in which inequities in HIV education and healthcare are to blame for HIV rates in black communities. Robinson explains how HIV, from the beginning, has been framed as a disease of identity—specifically, a white, gay disease—and how that framing has allowed black men who sleep with other men to understand themselves as outside the populations at risk (1512). Tapia, McCune, and Brody examine a number of public service posters to argue that health officials and the media are complicit in removing black men and women from dialogue about HIV by depending on tropes and identity categories (the closet, gay) that are associated with white culture (128).

[12] Boykin writes, "By rejecting the homosexual label, [black men] are not necessarily rejecting the sexual behavior associated with it. Black men often reject the term 'gay' to repudiate white social constructs of homosexuality but not to reject their own homosexual behavior. Some black men who openly acknowledge that they have sex with men have simply found other words to describe themselves, including the term 'same-gender loving.' They reject the term 'gay' not because of internalized homophobia or because they are on the down low. Instead, they simply

want to create their own identities outside of what they perceive to be a racially insensitive white gay world" (15-16).

[13] Two longer biographical accounts of Nugent's life were helpful to me in formulating this brief sketch: the chapter on Nugent in A. B. Christa Schwarz's *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (2003) and the introduction to Thomas Wirth's edited collection of Nugent's work, *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance* (2002). A website devoted to Nugent and maintained by Wirth, brucenugent.com, also provided dependable biographical information on which I draw in this biographical sketch. As of August 2016, however, the website is no longer accessible.

[14] To clarify, I am arguing neither that Alex understands his sexuality as exclusively homosexual nor that the reader is asked to understand it as such. After all, the story ends with Alex's insistence that "one *can* love two at the same time" (87). Through parallel sentence structure and word repetition, Nugent reiterates this insistence: "Beauty smiled and looked at him and smiled… said… I'll wait Alex… […] and it was Melva… and she looked at him and smiled and said… I'll wait Alex" (82-3).

[15] See Chauncey and Mumford. Also see Garber, "T'ain't" and "A Spectacle."

[16] On Van Vechten's primitivism, see Lemke and Bernard.

[17] It is worth noting that this scene, in keeping with the film's central theme, is structured by nostalgia, but here it is nostalgia for James Baldwin, a later black, gay American writer.

[18] Van Vechten recounts a similar story in his 1926 novel, *Nigger Heaven*. See chapter four, 216-27.

[19] Some chapters from Nugent's posthumously published *Gentleman Jigger* (2008) and Thurman's 1932 *Infants of the Spring* are similar enough to suggest that something beyond simple collaboration occurred as the two writers were working on these novels.

CHAPTER THREE

Truman Capote's Swans: Effeminacy, Friendship, and Style in Douglas McGrath's *Infamous* (2006)

Like Walt Whitman and Richard Bruce Nugent, Truman Capote, a queer literary figure who lived and wrote before the Stonewall Riots, has become a loaded sign in contemporary American gay culture. Recently, two feature films released only one year apart, *Infamous* (dir. Douglas McGrath, 2006) and *Capote* (dir. William Bennett, 2005), turned to the figure of Capote as a way to visualize historical alliances between straight women and gay men and to negotiate contemporary gay cultural tensions. *Infamous*, the main focus of this chapter, intervenes in longstanding contests over Capote's persona by capturing a complex relation at the intersection of femininity and gay men's culture. As I shuttled between the late nineteenth century and the 1990s in chapter one and between the 1920s and the early 2000s in chapter two, in this chapter I shuttle between a queer historical moment (the 1950s) and a contemporary moment (2000s and 2010s) to show how a film negotiates, in the key of nostalgia, the relationship between the two. The mainstreaming of white gay male culture since the 1990s has meant that taken-for-granted features of male homosexuality, particularly those attached to femininity and the feminine, no longer seem as centrally defining to gay identity as they once were. In contrast, McGrath's film, an artifact of the present that gazes back toward the past, offsets contemporary cultural trends by recuperating white gay male femininity, specifically as embodied by Capote. In this chapter, I argue that, in our moment of queer liberalism and gay progress, *Infamous'* celebration of Capote's attachment to femininity marked by social privilege, elite urban style, and implicit whiteness reveals a gay cultural loss perceived to be in need of mourning.

Infamous recounts a well-known story: Between 1959 and 1966, Truman Capote—author of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1958), friend to fashionable socialites, trafficker in high society gossip, minor literary figure of the southern gothic tradition—travels to small town Holcomb, Kansas.[1] There, he investigates the murders of farmer Herb Clutter, his wife Bonnie, and two of his children. With his friend Nelle (the novelist Harper Lee, author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*), Capote interviews Holcomb residents, including Kansas Bureau of Investigation Detective Alvin Dewey. Together, Capote and Nelle record those conversations, after which Capote fashions the narrative not into the magazine article he intended, but a book, *In Cold Blood* (1966), which he believes will inaugurate a new genre, the non-fiction novel. As Capote researches and writes, he makes trips back and forth between Kansas, where he visits the killers Perry Smith and Dick Hickock, and New York, where he socializes with his high society friends. He is present in 1965 when Smith and Hickock are finally hanged, an event that allows him to provide a decisive ending for his book.[2] It is an ending that comes at a high cost for Capote both personally and professionally; Capote's desire for an ending for *In Cold Blood* (the hanging of the killers) is at odds with his personal affection for and perhaps even attraction to Perry Smith. *Infamous* departs from the earlier film *Capote* in maintaining that, during the course of his research, Capote's relationship with Smith turned from merely friendly and flirtatious to overtly sexual. Indeed, *Infamous* highlights many of Capote's relationships, both sexual and nonsexual, which distinguishes it from the earlier film.[3] The film's Kansas scenes show how Capote's relationships with Midwestern women enable his investigative success in the Clutter killings, while the film's New York scenes nostalgically depict his relationships with the wealthy and powerful women he referred to as his "swans": Slim Keith, Babe Paley, Diana Vreeland, and Marella Agnelli. In both

locations, Nelle, Capote's most important intellectual interlocutor, figures prominently in the narrative the film offers about how *In Cold Blood* was brought to the page. *Infamous* presents Capote's effeminacy and his relationships with women as vital to his research process, his creative imagination, and the success of his non-fiction novel. In this chapter, I argue that the film's surprising thematic move is in part a nostalgic reaction against our own cultural moment, one in which many gay men seek to disidentify with effeminacy and with women themselves.

One of *Infamous*'s New York scenes illustrates how Capote's effeminacy, his relationships to women, and our contemporary nostalgic fascination coalesce. During a trip back to New York during the period in which he researches the Clutter murders, Truman attends a party at the home of his friend Diana.[4] His other "swans" are also in attendance, as are several of their husbands, as well as Truman's lover Jack Dunphy. Holding court in Diana's ornately decorated living room (a near-exact replication of Diana Vreeland's actual apartment as seen in the 2011 documentary *Diane Vreeland: The Eye Has To Travel* and elsewhere), Slim explains to the assembled group that Truman has asked, in this letters from Kansas, "What's the new thing that everyone loves?" In answer, Babe brings out a Chubby Checker recording and tells everyone that, according to her children, "the new thing" is a new dance, "The Twist." "You just can't resist it," she says, laughing. Her husband, CBS executive Bill Paley, sitting stoically, displeased and bored, deadpans, "I did."[5] Jack, also seated, retorts, "Well, assholes aren't much for dancing." An awkward silence falls, and Bill continues to needle Jack: "How's your writing coming?" he asks, slyly, bringing his cigarette to his lips, clearly aware of the answer. Diana moves toward the record player and turns it on, breaking the tension: "Well let's hear it!" Babe and Slim offer to demonstrate the dance move and insist that everyone—"You especially," Slim

says, pointing to Truman—join them. The women begin to dance. Truman and Marella study the dance move, giggling. Bennett Cerf, Truman's elderly publisher, joins Slim, Babe, and Diana on the dance floor. Coquettishly, Slim signals for Truman to join her. Truman, just as coquettishly, gestures, "Who? Me?" and then gets up and moves toward her. He is a natural, immediately picking up the move, dancing vigorously but delicately, wrists dangling, arms out at his sides—his dance a mirror image of Slim's and Babe's. This is not the powerful, stiff-wristed, palms-down maneuver that Chubby Checker himself performed, though it is the same dance—an elegant, delicate, collective, and feminine version of it. While Truman, Bennett, and the swans continue dancing, Bill complains at top volume, straining to be heard over the music: "Like I said, it's not a dance!" Either not hearing him or not interested in what he is saying, Truman and the women continue dancing, growing more and more innovative with the hand and arm movements of the dance. The lasso move of Checker's dance evolves into something more akin to, as Truman points out in the scene, the flamenco.

The lush period-style furniture and mid-century designer clothing pique the viewer's nostalgic desires, but so, too, do the historically specific music and dance, both widely and long understood as cultural forms that inspire nostalgia. The scene transports us to the cultural moment of "The Twist," the late 1950s, revealing that moment as, for the most part, pleasing and joyful. Truman's participation in the scene is emblematic of the kind of relationship he has with these women, relationships that are rendered particularly nostalgic here because of concurrent musical and visual content. The dance space is separate from but within view of the seating area in the room, but it is not a space where women dance *for* men. In fact, in most of the scene, Bennett, Truman, and the women are all facing toward each other, circling each other as they

dance, paying no attention to the men on the couch. Further, they use the dance to reconnect with each other after Truman's several-month absence—Slim and Babe explicitly note that the dance lesson is an attempt to keep him up-to-date on whatever is stylish, per his request. More importantly, though, they revision Checker's masculine dance moves in a feminine mode, creating an adaptation of "the Twist" that is purely their own. Bill and Jack's dour, seated attempts to turn the evening into a competition of male achievement are more or less ignored by the group dancing. This scene, I suggest, exemplifies how particular gay men and particular straight women might exist as creative subjects together outside the gaze of those for whom they are supposed to be constantly performing. This scene, importantly, plays out in a space—the mid-century American living room—weighted with nostalgia.

The various identities represented in this scene—gay men, straight men, straight women—do not cohere into a simple equation whereby all gay men and all straight women necessarily ally themselves against the displeased and bored heterosexual men who try to ruin their fun. The elderly heterosexual Bennett Cerf participates with Truman and the women, though his dancing is markedly different from theirs. And it is only when Truman begins to add his own arm and hand movements to the dance that it truly transforms into something indebted but not totally reducible to Checker's original dance. Learning from the women, he nonetheless transforms their movements through his own bodily expression. Truman's participation here is an iteration of David Halperin's argument that gayness, as a cultural form, works over the pre-existing culture and finds its strongest aesthetic expression in campily recoding earnest and sincere straight cultural artifacts (116). And, as Halperin emphasizes, gay cultural form has a more vexed and indeterminate relationship to gay sexuality than we often suppose. Truman's

lover Jack is as displeased as Bill to be in attendance and chooses not to participate in the dancing. In fact, Jack is seated in a chair outside the camera frame throughout the scene. Because Jack is also gay, yet continually reiterates his disinterest in the swans and their upper-class lifestyle, Truman's relationship with them cannot be said to be totally and solely a result of his gay identity. Here, a group of themes at once float free of each other here even as they seem capable of coproducing each other as well: effeminacy, homosexuality, the relationship between women and gay men, and our nostalgia as viewers. This scene and its textures—the setting, the music, and costuming—are unique to this filmic version of Capote's life. As the film critic Lisa Schwarzbaum points out, we cannot know whether "any of this is true, or if Mrs. Paley did teach her fellow socialite swingers to do the twist one madcap night. Truth, according to *Infamous*, has less to do with fact than with feeling." McGrath's lavish depiction of this creative dance session among Truman and his friends thus captures a particular confluence of male effeminacy, female friendship, implicit whiteness, and artistic creation—a confluence that McGrath surprisingly suggests might be accessed in nostalgic memories of mid-century American high society.

Queer theorists, gay historians, and contemporary queers are accustomed to thinking of mid-century Anglo-American homosexuality as singularly and extravagantly punishing. Stories of these years, more than those of perhaps any other decades, are crowded with narratives of suicide, alcoholism, drug addiction, violence, police harassment, and so on. This historical moment, so goes the typical story, was a very bad time to be queer. 1950s media paranoiacally depicted male homosexuality as a trait that was invisible to the heterosexual observer at the same time that it marked the homosexual as "identifiably different" (Edelman "Tearooms" 558). Meanwhile, in the grip of anti-communist hysteria, the state redoubled its efforts to solidify the

widespread notion of homosexuality "as an alien infestation, an unnatural because un-American practice, resulting from entanglement with foreign countries—and foreign nationals—during the war" (561). State surveillance, a strategy borne out of the tensions of the Cold War, was increasingly turned on U.S. citizens considered in some way deviant (561). As all these pressures coalesced against gays and lesbians, Freudian psychoanalysis (and its attendant theories of the "inappropriate identification" between a son susceptible to becoming gay and his mother) became trendy even among laypeople (567). In these years, homosexuality was both threatening and threateningly banal, invisible and discernable to the trained eye, and a sign of psychological illness that writes itself onto the physical body.

Meanwhile, even as gays and lesbians were persecuted by mainstream heterosexual culture, gay-affirmative activist groups such as the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis assented to the conservative terms of the broader cultural moment, Mattachine in one instance "replicat[ing] [President Harry S.] Truman's 1947 proposal to establish a loyalty program for federal employees [by] propos[ing] to form a 'Committee for Investigating Communist Infiltration' in 1953 in order to weed out subversives among the group to prove their 'respect to the flag' and commitment to being law-abiding citizens" (Shahani 58-9). The accepted historical narrative contends that American society at large was punishingly conservative during these years and that American gays and lesbians, struggling to integrate themselves into a society that desired their annihilation, mimicked many of the authoritarian policies and positions of the mainstream. (We are forcibly reminded, here, of our own contemporary moment.) This narrative about the 1950s and early 1960s is further entrenched by stories of the purportedly liberatory period that follows, the late 1960s and 1970s. The prevailing notion about these later years—

John D'Emilio calls it a "myth"—is that "before [the Stonewall Riots] there was naked oppression. After Stonewall, freedom beckoned" (148). D'Emilio, Heather Love, Christopher Nealon, and others have troubled simplistic narratives of progress that pivot somewhat arbitrarily around Stonewall. However, given the content of popular stories of Stonewall, which young gays and lesbians learn, the 1950s and early 1960s looks very much like the last gasp of a pre-liberated closeted life that no one would want to revisit.

Queer theorists have mostly abided by these terms, though with a crucial difference: The bad old days are, from a certain kind of contemporary queer perspective, rife with queer potential. Abjection, shame, despair: These are affective positions that queer theorists have long found productive and continue to mine, both in general as well as specifically with respect to this historical era. In *Queer Retrosexualities: The Politics of Reparative Return* (2012), Nishant Shahani describes how, in opposition to both the normative projects of the midcentury homophile movement as well as the accepted contemporary presumption that the 1950s was punishing for queers, queer texts that gaze backward often "*perversely embrace* the 1950s notion of queerness as a threat to the nation and to liberal ideology" in our contemporary moment (60-1; emphasis mine). Shahani further suggests that, in a queer anti-futurity framework, we might embrace the negativity ascribed to queers in these decades and ultimately locate *jouissance* in 1950s queer abjection.[6] Venturing into territory Edelman and other anti-futurity theorists would disavow, however, Shahani retains a hope that "the stigma of persecution in the past [can serve as] a seductive site for the embrace of otherness in the present and for the work of reparation in the future" (17).

Without doubt, both gay historical accounts and queer theoretical accounts of mid-century U.S. gay life help us conceptualize queerness across the twentieth century. Nonetheless, they fail to give us all the necessary tools for thinking about our contemporary fascination with archaic forms of effeminate male homosexuality and gay men's relationships to women. The exemplary cultural object at the center of this chapter is *Infamous*, but it is not the only extant evidence of contemporary fascination with these social formations. In *J. Edgar* (dir. Clint Eastwood, 2011), the notoriously anti-queer anti-leftist FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover facilitates the career of Helen Gandy, his ambitious and capable assistant, who turns down an opportunity to be his wife in exchange for an opportunity to be his co-worker and closest confidante. Their working relationship and sincere affection for each other is depicted in a strongly positive mode. Gandy might have become just another typist in the typing pool, but her ambition—and Hoover's desire to capitalize on that ambition—ultimately makes her one of the most powerful people in the FBI. The film recounts Hoover's attachment to his mother as well. When she dies, he puts on her dress and pearls in a scene that becomes at once a comment on rumors of Hoover's secret cross-dressing and a poignant depiction of his complicated grief over his mother's death. In *The Imitation Game* (dir. Morten Tyldum, 2014), the socially awkward gay genius Alan Turing disregards WWII-era gender norms and hires Joan Clarke, who scores nearly as high as Turing himself on the test Turing designed. Turing lies to Clarke's parents that she will be doing secretarial work in order to convince them to allow her to come to Bletchley Park. Despite the tragedies of Turing's life, his relationship with Clarke proves not only essential to his professional life, but to his personal life as well. In one of the final scenes, after Turing has been chemically castrated by the British government, Clarke visits him at his apartment. What ensues

is a tender scene during which she reminds him what he told her much earlier: "Sometimes it is the people no one imagines anything of, who do the things that no one can imagine." Perhaps overly sentimental, this repetition nonetheless connects their struggles and cements their bond. The film ends here, Turing's eventual suicide only suggested.

This current fascination with mid-century gay men and the relationships they had with women, I argue, occurs on the grounds of nostalgia, a positive rendering of an idyllic and beloved past rather than, as Shahani would have it, a perverse embrace of a damaged and painful past. This is not to suggest that mid-century queer life was not in fact uniquely punishing, difficult, or damaging for queers; I remain rigorously agnostic on that question. And, indeed, Hoover's and Turing's biopics render mid-century queer life in a much harsher light than does *Infamous*. However, even despite the abjection that characterizes all these films, representations seem to permit nostalgia around a particular set of questions I explore in this chapter. Among them: What kinds of relationships to women do we imagine mid-century gay men cultivating, and why do those relationships appeal to viewers now? What do memorialized and often-idealized portraits of gay femininity have to do with today's gay male culture, which sometimes seems to disavow femininity? How do depictions of gay male femininity underline the primacy of whiteness even as they destabilize the primacy of masculinity? And, ultimately, how do nostalgic stories about gender and sexuality force us to reckon with, perhaps reconsider, our received notions about both mid-century male homosexuality and mid-century straight women's lives?

Gay Men, Straight Women, and Gay Femininity Now

Sometime during the run of the popular sitcom *Will & Grace* (1998-2006), fatigue and irritation set in. The gay man / straight woman duo of ubiquitous mass appeal slowly began to feel, for many gay men, decidedly less appealing. Consider this *Huffpost* blogger's 2015 open letter to straight women: "I say all of this to challenge many straight women who currently have a gay male friend whom they claim to admire and adore. […] If you have not been made aware already, gay men are not accessories put on this Earth to fill the void that comes from your difficulty achieving healthy platonic relationships with straight men" (Owens). As aggressively unpleasantly as these concerns are phrased, they are, I would argue, not exceptional. The heroic fag hag figure of our pre-millennium imaginations—think of Mary Louise Parker in the 1989 AIDS drama *Longtime Companion*, for example—appears to be dead. In her place is the tokenizing sexually-frustrated shopping buddy of gay men's nightmares—think of the 2013 *Glee* scene wherein Tina assaults the sleeping Blaine with an ill-advised VapoRub massage. In 2000, the comedienne Margaret Cho famously joked (while making a serious argument) about the importance of the fag hag to the persistence of gay culture: "We were there from the beginning. [We] went to the prom with you, buckled up your cummerbund, did the safety dance." In this routine and others, Cho celebrates the tenacity and constancy of the fag hag. In contrast, a recent article quickly went viral, suggesting a broad cultural shift. The article, which, like Cho's comedy sketch, is about gay teens going to high school prom, sentimentally recounts how a straight male high school student in Las Vegas asked his gay male best friend to prom. Pictures of the two embracing accompany the story. On Tumblr, the gay student posted, "Guess who got asked to prom! BY A STRAIGHT GUY (Army pants). [He is] my best friend, and a real man given the fact that he has the guts to fulfill my gay student council dream of always helping out

planning dances, and never getting asked. I couldn't ask for a better person in my life" (Garcia). In other words, to simplify a narrative that deserves its own extended treatment, this and other evidence suggests that cultural interest in the fag hag figure has shifted to cultural interest in relationships between gay and straight men, a kind of "bromance." As particular, otherwise privileged iterations of gay identity have grown more acceptable to mainstream heterosexual culture, the perceived value of cross-gender cross-sexuality relationships has diminished accordingly.

Meanwhile, the era of gay male effeminacy has given way to the era of "masc4masc" and "no fats no femmes" on gay hookup apps. The British actor Russell Tovey, who most recently appeared in the gay HBO dramedy *Looking* and the gay period piece *Pride*, commented to *The Guardian*, "I feel like I could have been really effeminate, if I hadn't gone to the school I went to. Where I felt like I had to toughen up. If I'd have been able to relax, prance around, sing in the street, I might be a different person now. I thank my dad for that, for not allowing me to go down that path. Because it's probably given me the unique quality that people think I have" (qtd. in Lamont). Tovey's comments and the many Grindr, Growlr, and Scruff users who deploy this same kind of effemiphobic rhetoric exemplify how, as David Halperin explains in *How To Be Gay* (2013), gay desire—gay men's desire to have sex with other men—might finally have very little to do with gay culture, at least in our contemporary moment. Gay culture, then, in Halperin's formulation, has everything to do with relaxing, prancing, and singing in the street, despite what Tovey seems to say.

Although Halperin does not diagnose himself as nostalgic, he nonetheless offers a decidedly nostalgic reading of gender deviance among gay men: "Post-Stonewall gay male

political thought and culture discourages," to its detriment, "traditional forms of queeniness in men, considering them both unsexy and retrograde—unfortunate survivals of a bygone era of sexual oppression and internalized homophobia" (328). The identitarian projects of post-Stonewall gay culture do not account for the persistence of a gay culture organized around gay identification rather than gay identity—around identifying with the sassy elderly women on *The Golden Girls* or the tragic and tough women in *Steel Magnolias* rather than celebrating their shared sexual identity with the gay characters on *Will & Grace* or in *Brokeback Mountain*. Despite widespread acknowledgment of gay stereotypes around cultural forms such as opera, interior design, Broadway musicals, etc., few scholars take seriously the queerness of those forms, and what that formal queerness might have to do with gay men themselves. Gay men, on the other hand, have publicly denied these objects of desire once attached so consistently to them—opera, interior design, Broadway musicals, etc—and have pushed those objects into the closet. "Homosexuality's closet" labels not sexual secrecy but, rather, "*homosexuality as queer affect, sensibility, subjectivity, identification, pleasure, habitus, gender style*" (87; emphasis original). Homosexuality that is, as Halperin calls it, *effeminate* and *archaic*, is forced to remain secret, indulged in only occasionally and furtively, never earnestly. According to Halperin, there is a version of gay male culture to which femininity was once essential, but that version has passed away in favor of a version that labors to define gayness as only sexual, never cultural.[7] Halperin mourns that passing into mainstream respectability particularly as mainstreaming has meant denial of the aesthetic, creative, and distinctive aspects of gay culture—what he calls "the unique genius in being queer" (78).

After Halperin, I am taking up a focus on gay male femininity, which he defines as "not the qualities and characteristics of women but the non-standard formation of gender and sexuality that is distinctive to gay male culture" (320).[8] Departing from Halperin, however, I retain an interest in historicizing some of the complicated interrelationships between women and gay men, with which he is less engaged. To put this difference another way, while Halperin (neither uncharitably nor misogynistically) attends primarily to gay male "caricature" of and "obsession" with women (particularly mothers), I attend to female and gay male friendship (38). Halperin is ultimately asking questions about gay male femininity as style, while I want to ask questions about gay male femininity as social structure as well. However, his disarticulation of gay male femininity from femininity *tout court* remains a useful move for my purposes. As he writes, gay femininity, "however much it may *refer* to women, which it obviously does, is not always or essentially *about* women. It is its own form of gender atypicality, and it has specifically to do with gay men themselves" (318). I keep this disarticulation intact and purposely leave open, for now, the question of how Truman Capote's represented femininity and his recollected relationships with women are interrelated, coproducing, competing, or constitutive. Ultimately, if we remove the presumption that gay male femininity is necessarily about women but nonetheless observe it alongside particular kinds of gay male relationships with women, what might we discover about the interrelationships?

Gay Male Femininity, White Femininity

The co-occurrence of two contemporary phenomena—gay male disidentification with actual women and concurrent disidentification with the effeminate, the feminine, and the

fabulous—has been met by a nostalgic rebuttal of sorts in the form of a number of films that narrate the mid-century gay past, which lovingly depict both gay male effeminacy as well as a particular kind of relationship to women. *Infamous* is exemplary among these. If not universally critically hailed because of its implicit and explicit comparisons to *Capote*, which was released one year prior, *Infamous* is nonetheless a loving depiction of a complicated literary figure. As A. O. Scott writes in the *New York Times*, "In general, *Infamous* is warmer and more tender, if also a bit thinner and showier, than *Capote*, which focused on the deep ethical questions raised by the writing of *In Cold Blood* and emphasized the writer's cold, manipulative narcissism. […] *Infamous* is less a parable of literary ethics than a showcase of literary personality, and it is, in the end, more touching than troubling" (E10). (Note how Scott attaches feminine adjectives to *Infamous* while reserving a serious tone for his description of *Capote*.) Stylistically, I would add, *Infamous* is vibrant and cheerful, the cinematography awash in bright reds, blues, and yellows, the soundtrack befitting stories of wacky hijinx far more than life-and-death dramas. Critics agree: "*Infamous* is, in fact, prettier than *Capote*, with every visual detail more voluptuous than in last year's sparer version," Lisa Schwarzbaum writes. At the same time, *Infamous* is playful: In one scene, Truman strolls into Detective Alvin Dewey's Kansas office, wearing an outfit that might best be described as a campy send-up of a cowboy's ensemble—complete with hat, boots and bolo tie. In other words, *Infamous*—tonally, stylistically, formally, and thematically—provides a way to begin thinking through nostalgia for co-constituted gay male effeminacy and particular kinds of mid-century gay male relationships to women.

Much as *Infamous* exposes, celebrates, and aestheticizes Capote's effeminacy and the male homosexuality that it evidences, it simultaneously renders race invisible. Recall the scene

where the swans teach Truman to do "The Twist." Their feminine revision of the dance not only overwrites its (presumed) heterosexuality and embodied masculinity as originally performed by the black male artist Chubby Checker, it overwrites the racialized specificity of the dance as well. Femininity, it would seem, is necessarily white. The film theorist Richard Dyer argues that whiteness is produced largely by its representational invisibility, its status as "neutral and unsituated—human not raced," a kind of racial null set, which is certainly the case in this film (4). The racial injustices of 1950s rural Kansas (and, for that matter, 1950s New York) are illegible in *Infamous*. Perry Smith's Native American identity goes unmentioned as well. While perhaps not always the case, Dyer's argument that cinema, the "media of light," at once "assume[s], privilege[s] and construct[s] whiteness" resonates with the reviewers' claims about the stylistic vibrancy, brightness, and "voluptuous[ness]" of McGrath's film, in which whiteness comprises part of the unspoken content of gay male femininity (83; 89).

At the same time, Capote's white gay male femininity is a historically specific femininity. Writing about a retro-style queer pinup calendar published in the 2000s, Amber Musser reveals how the identity of the (female-identified) queer femme is sutured to history, particularly to the 1950s; for Musser, the femme is a "historical affect," which brings with it both "promises" and "pitfalls" (76; 70). On the one hand, the femme, draped in midcentury style, is capable of subverting the heteronorm and performing a critique of gender binarism. At the same time, "the femme's appeal also lies in her ability to reify the very categories she subverts," namely race, ethnicity, and class (77). What Musser ultimately argues about the images in the queer women's pinup calendar could be said of *Infamous* as well: "This attachment to the 1950s has to do with the persistence of certain ideals about the 1950s and femininity, and the particular

fantasy about present reinterpretations of the past to claim queerness without racial baggage" (69).

In *Infamous*, the figure of Truman Capote thus becomes a kind of nostalgic shorthand for the nexus of whiteness, male homosexuality, and effeminacy. The cultural critic Hilton Als implies as much when he categorizes Capote under the rubric *White Girls*, the title of his 2013 collection that includes an essay describing how Capote co-opted femininity and deployed it to his own ends. Als's essay focuses primarily on how Capote was, for all intents and purposes, a woman author, from 1947, when he posed for the photo that would appear on the back cover of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948), until the publication of *In Cold Blood* in 1966, when, threatened by the proliferation of women authors informed by early second-wave feminism and buoyed by the success of his non-fiction novel, he once again became a male author. Though Als's essay on Capote is ultimately more about Capote's identification with the category "girls" invoked by the title of the collection, it is also implicitly about his identification with the category "white." Taking Als, Dyer, and Musser as my cue, I argue that *Infamous* recuperates an abject gender style among white gay men, but performs no similar recuperation of racialized styles and embodiments. Consideration of Truman's whiteness and the whiteness of his swans (a bird that is, after all, typically white) is mostly eloquent in its absence.

Conversation and Creation in *Infamous*

Infamous opens on a nightclub, where Truman and his friend Babe (Sigourney Weaver) are in the audience as a lone female singer performs center stage behind a tall microphone. Following this opening scene, we observe Truman in his apartment, where he attempts to work

on his unfinished novel *Answered Prayers*, which he soon abandons to read the newspaper. There, he discovers the short article that sparks his interest in the Clutter murders: "Wealthy Farmer, 3 of Family Slain." He picks up the phone and invites a friend to lunch; "Bring lots of gossip," he says. Next, actors playing Babe Paley, Gore Vidal, and Diana Vreeland speak directly to the camera as if responding to an unseen interviewer. *Infamous*, based on the George Plimpton book *Truman Capote: In Which Various Friends, Enemies, Acquaintances and Detractors Recall His Turbulent Career* (1997) thus retains the structure of its source material.[9] These interviews are dispersed throughout the film and feature the actors playing Jack Dunphy, Nelle Harper Lee, Slim Keith, and others.

The next few episodes function as one extended scene, as they are intercut among each other and the conversation carries through them. First, Slim Keith (Hope Davis) and Truman, both dressed formally, sit at a small table in a cocktail lounge. Truman consoles Slim, who has just discovered her husband has cheated on her. Conversation then turns to a mutual friend, who has recently terminated a pregnancy that arose out of an extramarital affair.

> SLIM: I think she should just tell Dick it's his.
> TRUMAN: She can't. Dick's infertile.
> SLIM: What?!
> TRUMAN: Everybody knows that!
> SLIM: Well I'm sure they do now.
> TRUMAN: You see the paper? There's a story that stuck in my teeth like a little piece of pull candy.
> SLIM: What is it?
> TRUMAN: Well. These well-to-do farm people out in Kansas were murdered in the middle of the night in the most gruesome way imaginable.
> SLIM: Do they have any idea who did it?

At this point, we're transported to a new setting—a brown-paneled office building. Truman lounges in a blue chair while his editor at *The New Yorker* sits in the chair across from him. The conversation continues, uninterrupted:

> TRUMAN: No idea. But that won't affect the piece I want to write for you. I want to explore how a crime affects a town where everyone trusts each other.
> EDITOR: It may be preferable that we don't know the identity of the killers.
> TRUMAN: Exactly. Because what I imagine everyone is now afraid of is, *Who among us did this horrible thing?* It used to be you'd look at someone and think, *There's old Mr. Busybody*. Now, you think […]

Here, the cut between scenes is even more abrupt, occurring in the middle of a sentence. From the office of *The New Yorker*, we move back to the same nightclub where Truman and Babe were at the start of the film. Couples dance, Truman and Babe among them.

> TRUMAN: […] *Did you do it?*
> BABE: I can't bear the thought of you going to Kansas. Whom will I talk to?
> TRUMAN: That reminds me. Did you hear about Tracy?
> BABE: The eyes?
> TRUMAN: More. Abortion!
> BABE: Oh, I just saw her at Sotheby's! She bought an adorable Degas. I wanted it for the guest bath but Bill wants to put that little Giacometti man we have in the hall there.
> TRUMAN: Tell him nobody wants to go to the bathroom and find a little man in there. I know it from bitter personal experience!
> BABE: T-Bone! How did you find out about Tracy?
> TRUMAN: Slim. But I'm absolutely sworn to secrecy. I'm only telling you because you're my dearest friend.

Next, Truman, wearing a brown corduroy jacket, eats lunch with Nelle (Sandra Bullock) at a rustic diner. Her plain black purse sits on the red-checkered tabletop. She wears a brown sweater open over a beige button-up shirt and drinks beer from a glass mug. Truman drinks whiskey from a cocktail glass. The two discuss the gory Kansas murders with their mouths full of food.

> TRUMAN: Nelle, as my oldest and dearest friend, do you think the Kansas thing is good?
> NELLE: Are you joking? That small town stuff? That suspicion? That gossip? That is your world as much as this, maybe even more. [She takes a bite of her sandwich.] How were they killed?
> TRUMAN [with his mouth full]: Shotgun. But there's a caretaker not a hundred yards from the house. How could he not hear four gunshots in the dead of night?

Finally, the scene shifts again, this time to a restaurant where Truman sits in a purple velvet booth with Italian socialite and art collector Marella Agnelli (Isabella Rossellini). Behind them is an enormous arrangement of flowers in a large maroon vase. On the table sits a small lamp with a white fringed shade.

> MARELLA: Maybe [the caretaker] did it. Have you considered that?
> TRUMAN: Maybe. Though the victims were bound and gagged, which suggests at least two in the killing party—one with a gun to make them cooperate and one to tie them up and make them sorry they cooperated. [Both laugh.] The father and boy were shot in the basement. The mother and girl were shot in their beds.
> MARELLA: How do you know all this?
> TRUMAN: I called the D.A.

At this point, the film transports us to a drab bureaucratic Kansas office, where a middle-aged woman folds papers at her desk. She answers the phone. "May I tell him who's calling please?" she asks. "Yes, dear. This is Truman Capote," the voice on the line says, to which she responds, "I'm sorry. The district attorney doesn't take calls from strange women." Marella and Truman laugh at Truman's recollection. "And what did you say?" she asks. "Who says I'm strange?" he responds, and they both laugh. Marella puts her hand on Truman's cheek adoringly. Later that evening, we are at a party where Truman, seated on a footstool, legs crossed and holding a drink, chats with Diana and Slim, who are seated on either end of red floral couch, legs crossed, cigarettes dangling between their fingers, champagne glasses in their other hands. Having just regaled them with the phone call anecdote, he concludes: "They can judge for

themselves soon enough. I'm going down there in a week." Slim responds, "Which of your pillbox hats do you think they'll like best?" All three laugh.

The filmic technique by which McGrath flattens all these interactions into one long conversation suggests that we might read the exchange as exemplary of Capote's creative process—creation via conversation. Further, that creative process is both radically gendered and radically egalitarian. He traffics in gossip when he shares ideas with his "swans," but they (and, later, Nelle) are nonetheless meaningful interlocutors for him as he develops his theories of the crime and his plans to write about it. At the same time, their problems—their husbands' infidelities, their friends' abortions, their disputes with other women—are of deep and abiding interest to him. Conversation moves seamlessly from society gossip to murder and back to society gossip. The topics remain distinct, but are discussed in the same spaces among mostly the same group of people. This is what I mean when I insist that the scene is both highly gendered and radically egalitarian. There's no sense here of a hard line between "real news" and "women's gossip."[10]

The setting of these scenes, including the props, costumes, and lighting, is likewise highly gendered—the editor in his office, the "swans" in their spaces, and Nelle in an unpretentious diner—but it is the overtly feminine spaces that are particularly visually appealing to the viewer. Nelle's somewhat asexual diner space and the editor's brown paper-strewn office are less enticing than the glittering clubs and brunch spots where Truman chats with Diana, Babe, and Slim. These locations are teeming with visually exciting detail carefully selected and placed: golden faux palm trees and twinkling lights, an ornate frame around a pastoral scene flanked by gold wall scones and an enormous mirror that reaches outside the camera frame, red

velvet bench seating and table lamps with white fringed lampshades, bright red wallpaper and ruffled curtains printed with birds and flowers, and so on. McGrath deploys background scenery to strongly nostalgic—and strongly feminine—effect.

Truman's charm marks the playful quality of this interlocking group of scenes. He is singularly self-deprecating ("Who says I'm strange?") but does not present his sexuality as unthreatening, either ("No one wants to go to the bathroom and find a little man in there! I know it from bitter personal experience!"). He makes it his business to entertain his swans, and expects the same in return. In this respect, the *Infamous* Capote character greatly resembles the man biographers recount. He educated his female friends on art, music, fashion, and their relationships with men; they educated him on appropriate high society behavior (Clarke 268, 276). As Capote's biographer Gerald Clarke writes, "No Casanova had ever admired lovely women more fervently or had been so fervently admired himself. He flattered them, consoled them, tried to guide their destinies" (267-8). Clarke suggests that Capote gained a measure of self-esteem from the women's approval, which he sorely needed because of his broken relationship with his mother (276). Capote, upon moving to New York and meeting these women, learned that his effeminacy could be deployed to his benefit, as we see him doing in the film. This revelation marked a significant departure from Capote's childhood in the South and the lessons he learned from his mother, who disparaged him for his effeminacy and sent him into psychiatric treatment (25). In contrast, among friends in New York, Capote's "pronounced differences […] his stature, his mannerisms, and his voice" made him "very memorable"—memorable in the most positive way (29). When Capote travelled to Kansas, however, he found himself again in a place, like the American South of his childhood, where his effeminacy was not

a trait with widespread appeal (37). However, less important to the argument I am making is the actual biographical content of Capote's relationships with New York society women—what appealed to him about these relationships, what the relationships were based on, how they affected him, etc. More important is the fact that this film highlights and idealizes those relationships, installing them into the central plot of its narrative, and attaching to them much of its nostalgic content.

In its first few Kansas scenes, the film more or less acquiesces to a rural/urban, Northern/Southern binary. Though we do not sense that Truman himself is uncomfortable in rural Kansas (as perhaps the historical Capote was), we do witness how Kansans are made uncomfortable by him. At times, this discomfort takes the form of ridicule; other times, genuine confusion.[11] Again and again, he is mistaken, either in seriousness or jest, for a woman. At one point, Truman asks Nelle, "Do you think everyone keeps calling me 'lady' to be mean, or can they honestly not tell?" Later Nelle suggests he might have more success in his interactions with locals if he were willing to "come in a little under the radar here […] maybe come in on little cat's paws." His response is definitive: "I know where you're headed. But you, of all people, know how impossible it is for me to modify myself. […] It's no use—this cat has long, noisy nails!" he says, loudly, grinning. People within earshot look over at him judgmentally, but he smiles, seemingly enjoying the attention. To be clear, these are not uncomplicatedly celebratory portrayals of tolerance for sexual difference in the late 1950s. Indeed, Truman's effeminacy as initially depicted in *Infamous* hinders his ability to connect with the police and Holcomb residents from whom he wants to gather information—as evidenced by these early scenes—but that effeminacy is nonetheless unapologetically presented and played to light comic effect

(which is not to suggest that the scenes do not indicate homophobically violent social structures, because they certainly do). That this homophobia is played for laughs evidences the film's nostalgia. Oppression on the basis of sexuality, finally, is not as important to the story as the creative power of the women and the gay man at its center. One way the film shifts focus is to suggest that the same effeminacy so often mocked by others ultimately enables Truman's investigative success in surprising and unexpected ways. In this way, the film counters a simple story of abject effeminacy.

Over the course of the film, then, Truman's strategy—as distinct from Nelle's suggested strategy—is to highlight and deploy his effeminacy rather than obscure it. Further, he is cognizant of the correlation between his effeminate gender presentation and his ability to connect with women. Through him, the film implies that these two traits enabled Capote's success in social settings both rural and urban. In other words, rather than "com[ing] in on little cat's paws" or "modify[ing]" himself in order to make headway in his research, Truman takes advantage of, on the one hand, his immediate rapport with women and, on the other, his interest and fluency in what Halperin calls the "most despised and repudiated features" of gay male culture: "diva-worship, aestheticism, snobbery, drama, adoration of glamour, caricature of women" (38) and, I would add, knowledge of Hollywood gossip, which proves a great benefit to him when he socializes in Kansas.

If Truman is a minor celebrity among New York socialites and artists who populate the first several scenes of *Infamous*, he becomes a major celebrity among the upper echelon of Holcomb, Kansas housewives. He endears himself to them by recounting stories of Hollywood stars. He aligns himself with them in order to facilitate the kind of gossip his investigation

requires, making them his allies and confidantes. ("Honestly, Marie!" he exclaims to Detective Dewey's wife when Dewey refuses to let him accompany the FBI to arrest Smith and Hickock in Las Vegas, "How can you stay married to such a mule?!") In many ways, the same tactics that brought him success among his swans bring him success among the Midwestern women who become his best sources of information and who link him to other locals he can interview.

One of those Midwestern women is Detective Dewey's wife.[12] Immediately before Christmas, Truman goes to the supermarket to buy food for himself and Nelle to eat in their hotel room on the holiday. Standing at a comically large tinsel-wrapped case of Velveeta cheese, he encounters a woman who, as he learns later, is Detective Dewey's wife. By this point, Truman has been trying to get Dewey to meet with him for several weeks. Commiserating over the lack of cheese options, Truman makes a friend in Marie Dewey, who invites him and Nelle to Christmas dinner at their house. Nelle brings a fruitcake—"And she doesn't mean me," Truman declares—and Truman brings a framed drawing of a fox, which he gifts to Detective Dewey, whom he has nicknamed "Foxy." Truman sits in the living room with Detective Dewey and the other man in attendance, Dewey's friend. The men bring up football, and ask Truman if he likes it. He responds, "Not much. Though I must admit it always sends shivers up my spine when the men get inside that little huddle and whisper." Dewey and his friend appear slightly uncomfortable, but say nothing. Later, when the women rejoin them, conversation turns to undesirable Christmas gifts. Nelle reveals that her least favorite gift was a "shawl from an elderly neighbor lady." Nelle, Marie Dewey, and the other woman at the party agree that they dislike shawls. Truman, sitting upright on the couch in the center of the room, exclaims, "Are my ears working properly? Am I the only one here who loves shawls?" Dewey says, "Don't look at me,"

and Truman continues: “My goodness! I love shawls! I have several. I think the prettiest one is the one Jennifer Jones gave me.” Marie stops him in the middle of the story to make sure he’s referring to the famous movie star Jennifer Jones. He confirms, then continues the anecdote, which features appearances by Humphrey Bogart—at which point the men at the party are suddenly interested—as well as Peter Lorre and John Huston. Even the Deweys’ son, who had been standing sullenly in the hallway, steps into the room to listen to Truman. By the end of his story, which recounts his time in an Italian hospital where, despite suffering from an impacted tooth, he “felt and looked dreamy” because of the shawl gifted to him by Jennifer Jones, everyone is enthralled. Nelle, who had been visibly anxious when Truman began his story about the Jennifer Jones shawl, now looks amused and not unimpressed. Truman then recounts another anecdote in which he beat Bogart twice at arm wrestling, which Dewey doesn’t believe. Outside on the porch, Truman allows the Deweys’ son to beat him at arm-wrestling. When Dewey continues to question whether he actually beat Bogart, Truman tells him, “You don’t think I’d defeat your child on a Christmas afternoon, with everyone here thinking what they do about me. That would be a gift of switches and ash.” Dewey still doesn’t believe him, so Truman challenges Dewey himself to a match, which Truman wins handily. “Listen, Foxy,” Truman says afterwards, “When you’re tiny, you have to be tough. This world isn’t kind to little things.” Dewey and Truman shake hands, cementing their friendship. The following day, Nelle and Truman discover that a number of women in Holcomb (no doubt having heard Mrs. Dewey’s positive report) have called to invite the two of them to dinner. What follows is a montage of Truman and Nelle at various Kansas homes, Truman entertaining with stories of Ava Gardner and Marilyn Monroe. At one such event, he learns from one of Bonnie Clutter’s friends that

Bonnie was going through menopause and had been depressed in the weeks before the murders. Finally, Truman's strategic socializing nets tangible results for his research.

I describe these scenes at length in order to show how Truman slides back and forth between male identification and female identification and between masculine self-presentation and feminine self-presentation. In a 1950s-era supermarket (a gendered space), shopping for a meal (a gendered activity), he meets and befriends Marie Dewey. At the party, though, he sits in the Deweys' living room talking with the other men while Nelle helps the women in the kitchen (a gendered division of labor), but he responds to a question about football by bringing up the homoerotics of the sport. A story he begins about his favorite shawl (a feminine article of clothing gifted to him by a woman), ends with an arm wrestling match with a Kansas detective (a typically masculine competitive activity). He alludes to "what everyone [in Holcomb] thinks of" him, but he ultimately charms them all and parlays the Christmas party into a much wider circle of acquaintances. His male gender, queer sexuality, effeminate gender presentation, and alliances with women are all variously on display here, together and separately. Keeping in mind Judith Butler's famous correction of misreadings of her theory of performativity, I do not mean to suggest that Truman's performance of gender and sexuality in these scenes implies that all such performances are voluntary, willed, or purposeful.[13] Rather, my investment is in bringing out how this filmic portrayal of Truman's gendered and sexual identities highlights and privileges the feminine both in his relationships with other men and in his relationships with women. This kind of social embodiment, anathema to many forms of contemporary gay culture, finds a positive, loving representation in this nostalgic depiction of the late 1950s.

Critical responses to Truman's effeminacy as portrayed in *Infamous* reveal how our contemporary moment, on its own terms, lacks a viable anti-homophobic mode for understanding the potential genius of effeminacy.[14] The film critic Mick LaSalle writes, "It's certainly difficult to believe that the *flouncing, fluttery, gossipy, ridiculous* Capote, as played by Jones, could have felt, much less written, *In Cold Blood*" (emphasis mine). Phyllis Frus, in her analysis of *Infamous* and *Capote*, cites LaSalle and then apparently adopts his position: "One effect of [Jones's effeminate portrayal of Capote] is to make us wonder how this *flighty poseur* could have written the clear and lucid prose of the series that sold out the *New Yorker* for four issues and became one of the biggest publishing phenomena of the 1960s" (55; emphasis mine). By one account, then, the critical disappointment of *Infamous* in comparison to *Capote* is due to the very characteristics I am arguing make *Infamous* an indispensible cultural text for thinking through the interaction of nostalgia, male homosexuality, effeminacy, and relationships with women. The commentary of these critics—one writing for a popular audience in the *San Francisco Chronicle* and one writing for an academic audience in a film journal—underscores not only how certain features of male homosexuality, particularly features connected to femininity and to women, are dismissed as not rigorous, not serious, not clear, not lucid, and not aesthetically coherent. Foundational texts of masculinity studies have long made this connection, but the connection redoubles in significance as gay male cultures move more and more to the mainstream. Cooper Thompson, writing as early as 1985, succinctly (if somewhat simplistically) outlines the interrelationship: "What I believe are the two most critical socializing forces in a boy's life [are] *homophobia*, the hatred of gay men (who are stereotyped as feminine) or those men believed to be gay; and *misogyny*, the hatred of women. These two forces are targeted at

different classes of victims, but they are really just the flip sides of the same coin. Homophobia is the hatred of feminine qualities in men while misogyny is the hatred of feminine qualities in women" (79; emphasis original). In the context of *Infamous*'s critical reception, then, the "flouncing, fluttery, gossipy, ridiculous" Capote can only be understood as a "flighty poseur," never as a creative force drawing on the tools of a particular kind of mid-century male homosexuality. Now, as Halperin explains, we tend to view that particular kind of homosexuality only as an "unfortunate survival of a bygone era of sexual oppression and internalized homophobia" (328).

To a lesser extent, Bennett Miller's *Capote* shares some interest in the kinds of relationships with women that *Infamous* catalogs in detail. Little of *Capote* takes place in New York, so the swans do not appear as named characters, although they may be represented but unnamed in the groups of friends Truman entertains during several of the film's brief interludes in New York. However, in Kansas, Truman meets Detective Dewey because his wife is a fan of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, Capote's previous novel. (There is no encounter at the Velveeta case in this version of events.) At their home, he and Nelle chat with Marie Dewey in the kitchen, Truman coaching Marie to add more and more spice to the dish she's preparing. Laughing, he tells her, "shake it with your wrist, use your whole arm!" and she does so. Moments later, she and Truman are talking casually about New Orleans, where Marie grew up and Truman lived for a brief period. In confidence, Marie admits that Detective Dewey is also a fan of Truman's novels and even went as far as to ask one of his officers traveling to Kansas City to buy a copy of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, banned in Holcomb, and bring it back to him. In many ways, this scene mirrors the dancing scene from *Infamous*. It highlights, however subtly and

ironically, a particular movement of the body—"shake it with your wrist, use your whole arm!"—strongly associated with male effeminacy. At the same time, the scene solidifies Truman's relationship with Marie Dewey, which leads to a friendship with Detective Dewey as well, who consents to show Truman and Nelle photos from the crime scene later that night. In another similar scene, Truman, hoping to meet Perry Smith, visits the sheriff's wife Dorothy at home. In order to keep the conspirators separated, Perry is held in a makeshift cell in a corner of the sheriff's kitchen. Later, we learn this is the rarely used "woman's cell." He brings Dorothy an inscribed edition of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, a copy of the local paper, and breakfast in a paper bag. Again, in a gendered space, Truman facilitates his relationship with a housewife whose connections and knowledge prove vitally important to his research. In later scenes, he returns to the kitchen jail cell to speak with Perry, so the viewer assumes his relationship with the sheriff's wife enables him access to Perry. In this film, too, then, Truman's strategic socializing—sometimes undergirded by his feminine embodiment—nets tangible results for his research.

It is not only in the research but also in the writing process that Truman's women collaborators are vitally important. The innovation of *Infamous* is in how it centralizes the act of a gay man's literary creation around women and around femininity. Early in the film, we see Truman and Nelle laboring over their records, trying to put down the most accurate version of each witness' interview statement. Later in the film, however, Truman goes to his swans to test out slight variations on a particular statement Perry makes about his feelings toward Herb Clutter. Truman recounts the line to Slim: "Right before I cut his throat, I was thinking how nice he was." When he tells Babe the story, the line is slightly different: "He was a nice soft-spoken

gentleman. And I thought that right before I cut his throat." Marella and Diana hear a third variation: "I thought he was a very nice gentleman. Soft-spoken. I thought so right up to the moment I cut his throat." This last iteration brings about the strongest reaction: Marella and Diana declare, "What an extraordinary thing to say! Extraordinary!" On a yellow lined notepad that fills the entirety of the film's frame, Truman's hand moves past lines where he's written in blue pen the three alternate variations of Perry's statement. At last, his hand rests on the statement as he delivered it to Marella and Diana. With the same blue pen, he puts a large check mark beside that version. (The film never clarifies which, if any, were the words Perry actually said.) Truman's swans—the women he trusts as taste-makers—are the same women he trusts to determine literary merit. Again we are reminded that, for Truman as depicted in *Infamous*, there is no hard line between women's expertise and "legitimate" (male) expertise. In other words, the film doesn't show us Truman returning to his editor's brown-paneled office for advice on the minutiae of particular important lines in the novel. Instead, the film is at pains to show us how essential the swans' collaboration was to the success of *In Cold Blood*.

If the swans as depicted in *Infamous* and the Holcomb wives as depicted in both *Infamous* and *Capote* prove essential collaborators in helping Truman craft the language of his novel, Nelle's interventions and guidance prove even more crucial. She forces him to confront the two questions integral to his project: First, what are the ethical implications of the non-fiction novel genre? Second, does Truman want the killers to be put to death because it benefits his writing or does he want them to live because he has grown personally attached to Perry? When Truman initially suggests that he plans to augment or revise the truth in order to tell his factual story using the tools of fiction writing, Nelle balks. "Either it is [true], or it isn't," she tells him.

As their argument intensifies, it becomes clear that what has piqued Nelle's anger is her belief that Truman plans to "turn Bonnie Clutter into some faux-poetic recluse" rather than admitting Bonnie's depression arose from menopause. "*[To Kill a] Mockingbird* was based on true things and you sure improved that," Truman counters. Finally, she relents—"It's your book"—and she slams the door behind her as Truman shouts, "Yes. My seventh."[15] (Truman and Nelle reconcile in the following scene by a subtle exchange of looks.) Later, when Truman is back in New York, he and Nelle discuss the book's ending. "Death would be better for the book," Truman explains, "It would satisfy the readers more and it would make the title work too." Nelle stares at him, shaking her head, while he insists that a jury's "dumb decision" should not be the reason his book has an unsatisfying ending. Nelle's negative reaction to his callousness apparently has some effect. Later, when Truman visits Perry in his cell after the jury has returned the death sentence, Truman appears genuinely sad. It is as if he didn't realize how deeply connected he was to Perry until Nelle made him doubt his unexamined desire to see the killers hang. Truman's susceptibility to Nelle's approval or disapproval throughout *Infamous* and as evidenced particularly in these scenes confirms what Frus writes about the film. Unlike *Capote*, which depicts its central character as "a kind of monster" with little or no concern for others, *Infamous* shows us someone more sensitive and vulnerable, someone caught up in circumstance rather than working behind the scenes to manipulate it (56).

Infamous (and, to some extent, *Capote*) insist on versions of the *In Cold Blood* Holcomb investigation that centralize not only the contribution of women, but the contribution of Capote's own effeminacy and his ability to identify with the women he meets. If Als is correct that Capote was a woman author until 1966, *Infamous*, which is set at the end of the 1950s and beginning of

the 1960s, is the story of how Capote the woman author wrote the book that would bring him back into the fold of "serious" male authorship. Many critics have read *In Cold Blood* through queer analytical lenses, but *Infamous* recreates the inception of the thoroughly masculine book as an extraordinarily feminine process.[16] The film, then, does its own kind of queer analysis, rendering the writing of *In Cold Blood* just as queer as many critics long have claimed its themes to be.

The release of both these biopics in the cultural moment of intensified mainstreaming of (some kinds of) gay male culture evidences what Elizabeth Freeman calls "temporal drag," a concept that bears a close relationship to queer nostalgia. Deploying the metaphor of the wave in speaking specifically about feminism, she writes that "the undertow is a constitutive part of the wave; its forward movement is also a drag back" (65). And further, that an identity in temporal drag—here, gay male identity—is always "constituted and haunted by the failed love-project that precedes it" (93). These two biopics show how femininity, male effeminacy, and gay male relationships with women comprise a kind of undertow in the progressive story of mainstream gay male culture. Truman's effeminacy and his relationships with women feel, to use Halperin's term, archaic. However, those vestigial forms of gay identity are, by the terms of temporal drag, essential to the entire movement of gay history.

Truman Capote and Identification Without Identity

By all accounts, Capote was no feminist. In a *Harper's Bazaar* photo essay published only one month before he would depart for Holcomb, Kansas, he writes adoringly of the beautiful women whose photos accompany his article (one of whom is Babe Paley). As he

attempts to convey the complicated aesthetics of femininity as enacted by women like Babe, he maligns the "clever wom[a]n," the "witch-eyed brilliant who [is] simultaneously the swan's mortal enemy and most convinced adorer" (122). Parsing women into categories based on physical attractiveness and mental cleverness, he reveals views on gender that certainly read as retrograde now. He would soon be out of step with his own time, as well, as the burgeoning feminist movement would seek to make women, both beautiful and plain, sisters in struggle. Capote's beautiful/plain binary last only a few lines, however, before he complicates his categories, reserving some degree of strategic agency for women who are not naturally beautiful but who nonetheless "occasionally provide the swan-illusion" because "their inner vision of themselves is so fixed, decorated with such clever outer artifice, that we surrender to their claim, even stand convinced of its genuineness" (124). This third kind of woman is evidence of the social constructedness of gender, though Capote does not put it in those terms. Further, reading Capote's biographer alongside Capote's photo essay, it is easy to imagine that Capote probably understood his own femininity as exemplary of this third category. Clarke writes,

> What drew him to these elegant swans was not just their beauty, riches and style—he disliked many women who had all three. What captured his imagination, what made his favorites shine so brightly in his eyes, was a quality that was essentially literary: they all had stories to tell. Few of them had been born to wealth or position; they had not always glided on serene and silvery waters; they had struggled, schemed and fought to be where they were. They had created themselves, as he himself had done. (274)

As Clarke tells it, the swans to whom Capote felt most emotionally close were precisely this third kind of woman whose performance of her own gender is so smart as to seem effortless—but is, importantly, not effortless to the careful connoisseur of femininity. This constructed

femininity is in fact preferable, he writes, arguing that, "after all, a creation wrought by human nature is of subtler human interest, of finer fascination, than one nature alone has evolved" (124).

Keeping in mind Halperin's notion of identification without identity, I suggest that—despite Capote's certainly less-than progressive mid-century notions of feminine value as it attaches to physical appearance—he was also invested in positioning himself alongside the women he wrote about in *Harper's Bazaar* and elsewhere, as co-authors of a carefully curated feminine aesthetic.[17] Ultimately, Capote as depicted in *Infamous*—his style both written and performed, his unconventional research process, his friendships with women, his mid-century effeminacy—stand in stark contrast to the earlier film, which represents its main character's effeminate qualities as just that—characteristics. Those characteristics never achieve the kind of structural import they are granted in *Infamous*. While perhaps not as faithful to the historical record nor as thematically dense as the more critically lauded film, *Infamous* contributes meaningfully not only to our shared recollections of this literary figure, but also to our conversations about the aesthetics of gay male femininity and female/gay male friendships. In other words, as it draws a contrast to the present, *Infamous* reveals and reminds us how inextricably intertwined are the styles of gay men, of women, and of embodied femininity in all its forms.

[1] Though not completely unanimous, most critics declare *Capote* the better film. Mick LaSalle writes, "Before going into [the] virtues [of *Infamous*], however, the main question must be answered: Is it as good as *Capote*? The answer is no. *Infamous* offers a more surface rendering of the story, while *Capote* was more internal and mysterious." Lisa Schwarzbaum declares that "a goggly interest in gossip becomes the glittering gimmick of *Infamous*, as well as its undoing as a work that can measure up to the rigorous, sophisticated understatement of Bennett Miller's *Capote.*" I return to the question of why critics have tended to prefer *Capote* to *Infamous* in a later section of the chapter. One answer to this question, I argue, has to do with the deployment of Capote's effeminacy and his relationships with women in each film.

[2] Film critics agree that *Capote* and *Infamous* both offer an interpretation of events whereby Capote's emotional involvement with the crime and the killers led directly to the downward spiral into alcoholism, drug addiction, and decreased artistic productivity that plagued his life after the publication of *In Cold Blood*. Phyllis Frus writes that the two films "share the same basic interpretation: Something happened during those six years that affected Capote profoundly, sending him on a downward trajectory that ended in his death at age fifty-nine" (53-4). Mick LaSalle agrees, concluding that "The filmmakers' overall take on each story is identical as well: The book made Capote, and it ruined him." The films no doubt lift this interpretation in part from Gerald Clarke's 1988 Capote biography. Another Capote biographer, Sam Kashner writes, "Truman's decline is usually blamed on the debacle caused by [the publication of 'La Cote Basque 1965,' which destroyed his relationships with most members of New York high society], but Gerald Clarke believes the seeds of his self-destruction were planted much earlier, when he was researching *In Cold Blood*."

[3] Film critic Dan Callahan contrasts *Capote* and *Infamous* by pointing out that the former is "a solemn, limited chamber piece and one-man show for Philip Seymour Hoffman, who won an Oscar for his work."

[4] Throughout this chapter, I use the name "Truman" to refer to the character depicted in *Infamous*. In contrast, I use the name "Capote" to refer to the historical person Truman Capote, the author of *In Cold Blood*. While I do not mean to insist on a rigid or uncomplicated division between the actual and the depiction, I do want to underline how the Truman Capote in the film is ultimately a character.

[5] Historical accounts of William (Bill) Paley differ from his portrayal here. Most sources confirm that he, Babe, and Truman were all particularly close, often traveling through Europe as a trio. Many suggest Capote was as much in love with Bill as he was enamored by Babe. The version of Bill that *Infamous* offers—stodgy, grumpy, detached—probably does not, then, much resemble the historical Bill Paley, at least insofar as his relationship with Truman is concerned. See Clarke, *Capote*.

[6] Shahani writes, "In returning to the 1950s, the texts that I examine embrace a logic of negativity that is ascribed to them in this decade. Queers in the 1950s were not just a threat to the sanctity of the nuclear family; they challenged the very moral fabric of a Cold War nation itself. Queers disrupted the Rockwellian 1950s ideal predicated on economic prosperity and political

conformity. In Edelman's terms, they occupied the 'inarticulable surplus' of the decade, antithetical to the very terms of 'social viability.'" (20-1).

[7] Halperin writes, "[T]he official gay and lesbian movement has effectively foreclosed inquiry into queer sensibility, style, emotion, or any specific, non-sexual form of queer *subjectivity* or *affect* or *pleasure*" (77).

[8] Elsewhere, Halperin adds to his definition, writing that "same-sex desire cannot be dissociated from its conditions of formation; it is not just an expression of sexual intermediacy or effeminacy, with no erotic component. […] It would be equally unwise to cordon off gay male cultural practice from all implication in gender inversion, gender deviance, or gender atypicality. […] Most gay male cultural practices, after all from diva-worship to interior decorating, turn out to be strongly inflected by feminine meanings, and there is no point in obfuscating that fact" (334). However, he cautions: "Many gay male cultural practices are therefore not masculine or feminine […], nor do they exactly demonstrate a combination of masculine and feminine characteristics or a condition halfway between male and female. Rather, they imply something else, something unique, or at least a particular formation of gender and sexuality that is specific to some gay men and that has yet to be fully defined" (317).

[9] While *Infamous* retains the structure of Plimpton's book—people speak about Capote and recall their interactions with him—those interviewed in the film and those whose comments are collected in Plimpton's biography overlap in only two cases: Diana Vreeland and Gore Vidal. Aside from Vreeland and Vidal, none of the characters interviewed in *Infamous* appear in Plimpton's book. See Frus, 57.

[10] Frus refers to "the effect of reading the unassimilated interviews" in Plimpton's book as "akin to reading gossip" (56). McGrath's adaptation of Plimpton's book shares some of that gossip-like quality as well, though Frus argues that we receive a more fully coherent story about Capote's life from viewing the film than we do from reading the book on which it is based.

[11] After arriving in Kansas, Truman goes to the police station, where Dewey is holding an informal press conference. He yells his question over a group of reporters in plain black suits and ties who are crowded around Dewey. The crowd parts, and Dewey sees Truman standing at the bottom of the stairs wearing a belted coat with a fur hood. In answering his question Dewey refers to him as "ma'am" and one of the reporters jokes that he must work for *Ladies Home Journal.* The men and women Nelle and Truman meet later on the street appear to be genuinely confused about whether Truman is a man or a woman.

[12] Marie Dewey appears in Plimpton's biography only briefly, interviewed alongside her husband; no other housewife Capote meets in Kansas appears.

[13] See Butler, 12-16.

[14] By specifying "viable anti-homophobic mode," I am bracketing popular homophobic accounts of male effeminacy that depict it as a deeply creative and intelligent—albeit evil and insidious—performance designed to spread, disease-like, among "normal" men.

[15] Though both *Capote* and *Infamous* show Truman and his partner Jack conversing via phone about the success of Nelle's book, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, only *Capote* highlights her success

elsewhere. The film features a scene in which one of Truman's fans sees Nelle in the doorway of a crowded room and calls out to ask her about her recently-published "children's book," then corrects himself, "book about children." Given the enormous popularity of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, it is ironic—and, from a feminist perspective, revealing—how dismissive of it Truman's fans are.

[16] Ralph Voss undertakes one such queer reading in *Truman Capote and the Legacy of* In Cold Blood. The fourth chapter of Kathryn Bond Stockton's *The Queer Child, Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* also reads *In Cold Blood* through a queer lens.

[17] What ended Truman Capote's relationships with his swans was his ill-advised publication of "La Cote Basque, 1965" a thinly veiled depiction of the swans in which he deployed all their secrets, traumas, and embarrassments to his purpose as a storyteller.

CHAPTER FOUR

In the Past, Across the Ocean: Nostalgic American Dreams of 1930s Berlin

I began this dissertation with a reading of Samuel Delany's nostalgic memories of New York's Times Square in the years before then-mayor Rudy Guiliani began pushing out porn theatres and other sex-related businesses. Delany longs for the queer sociality enabled by the unplanned diversity of New York urban life before the 1990s. This chapter takes up a similar thread by reading two nostalgic texts that long for the queer sociality of another cosmopolitan city that has defined modernity: Berlin. In what follows, I attend to two iterations of queer nostalgia for the German capital as it existed in the early 1930s: the 2011 film adaptation of the novelist Christopher Isherwood's *Christopher and His Kind* (1976) and the second season of Amazon's television series *Transparent*, created by Jill Soloway (2015). In both, nostalgia is the mode through which the creator and audience access a queer Berlin—even a historically specific queer Berlin retrospectively defined by the forces of right-wing fascism on the global stage. And, indeed, the specificity of Berlin as a location of queerness textures Isherwood's recollections and Soloway's imagination of the early 1930s period, giving shape to the temporal experience of nostalgia by grounding it in a particular space. Nostalgia, as the central circulating emotion in both texts, invites the viewer to mourn the loss of those queer social formations so decisively destroyed by the rise of Hitler and the Nazis.

One of the critiques of nostalgia that I take seriously in this dissertation's introduction and throughout is that nostalgia can have the effect of eliding the differences of gender, race, class, and ethnicity that are essential to any just and fair historical account. In part, this chapter argues that spatial specificity is a way queer nostalgia avoids the pitfalls of gendered, raced,

classed, and ethnic erasure. Queer nostalgia, as distinct from the kinds of nostalgia some might rightly dismiss as irresponsible to various salient categories of difference, retains resonances of the older meaning of the word. Indeed, as I explain in the introduction to this dissertation, before the turn of the twentieth century, *nostalgia* was defined as an "acute longing for familiar surroundings," a feeling akin to homesickness, and a feeling about place as much as about time (*OED*). If the presumed violence of nostalgia is, in part, that the emotion myopically idealizes historical moments that were not uniformly positive for everyone and thereby re-centralizes the experiences of white males, cisgendered heterosexuals, the upper class, and westerners, I argue that attending to the particulars of space and place—as the word *nostalgia* used to do on its own—is one way *queer nostalgia* distinguishes itself and hence becomes particularly useful.

Attention to space and place in these texts also means attention to United States gay and queer cultures, which are the focus of the first three chapters of this dissertation. Though Germany in general and Berlin specifically are essential to the narratives, the nostalgia of those narratives ultimately reveals the changing contours of American queer culture in the moments of their respective creations. In more basic terms, and to echo a refrain that carries throughout this dissertation, nostalgic representations tell us more about the text's contemporary moment than about the past they seek to represent. Further, both the Isherwood biopic and the second season of *Transparent* depict uniquely American dreams of idealized non-American queerness as it existed in the past. By marking precisely what Isherwood recounts about queer Berlin life in the early 1930s, we uncover how his recollections (both on the page and on film) register some of the concerns of the early gay liberation movement. By marking precisely what Soloway's 2015

television series recounts about queer Berlin life in the early 1930s, we observe how the growing trans* movement has shifted queer culture at large in recent years.

Though both texts register nostalgia for non-American spaces, they are themselves nonetheless American texts. Indeed, one of the central concerns I return to throughout this chapter regards how—and to what ends—queer nostalgic American desires are displaced onto this European locale. Two historically specific, contrasting sets of American queer values form the basis of the nostalgia that circulates in the two texts. In both film and written versions of *Christopher and His Kind*, 1930s Berlin holds the promise of exuberant non-monogamy and promiscuity, openness to and respect for BDSM and other non-normative sexual practices, accessible and affordable sex workers, and a vibrant public sex culture. In the 1970s, as Isherwood was writing the autobiography that would become the later film, he was embraced by the burgeoning gay community in Los Angeles, where he had become a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1946. In *Transparent*, 1930s Berlin holds the promise of sexual and gender diversity, city protection of queer and trans* and gender non-conforming lives, and the alliance of diverse kinds of sexual and gender non-normativity under the sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld's all-encompassing label "sexual intermediaries," a label Hirschfeld used to collapse the categories we now delineate as gay male, lesbian, queer, trans*, cross-dresser, and gender non-conformists. In contrast with the contemporary scenes from Soloway's series, which highlight the tension and distrust between gay culture and politics and trans* culture and politics, 1930s Berlin offers an alternative—a coalition of sexual and gender non-conformists who function together in opposition to the encroaching fascism of the Nazi regime.

The pairing of *Christopher and His Kind* and *Transparent* is not intended to reveal how one is in some way preferable, more radical, queerer, than the other. Rather, I begin with an analysis of the queer nostalgia in Isherwood's biopic, which is in keeping with the kinds of gay male nostalgia that the previous chapters chart. Then, I turn to *Transparent* in order to show how queer nostalgia registers outside gay male historical contexts—in this case, in a transgender and gender non-conforming historical context that centers around Hirschfeld's famous Institute of Sex Research. As the field of queer studies increasingly focuses attention on trans* cultures and histories, I argue that nostalgia remains a vital reparative mode for negotiating queer relationships to the past.

Why Weimar? Queer Possibility in 1930s Berlin

In Isherwood's autobiography *Christopher and His Kind*, the author writes nostalgically, even idealistically, about his time in Berlin. He recalls the bars that he frequented with his close friend Wystan Auden (the poet W. H. Auden), describing them as a haven of hedonism and decadence at once unique in the city and yet indisputably Berlin: "Here screaming boys in drag and monocled, Eton-cropped girls in dinner jackets play-acted the high jinks of Sodom and Gomorrah, horrifying onlookers and reassuring them that Berlin was still the most decadent city in Europe" (29). No doubt because of the pervasive sexual freedom he enjoyed in the German capital, Isherwood writes about his experiences there differently than about his experiences in his native England, where his mother tries to control and manipulate him and where, perhaps because of her suffocating presence, he perceives the culture at large as restrained, conservative, and too conventional. The German language becomes a kind of avatar for Berlin's sexual

freedom as it permits Isherwood to converse with his sex partners, which has the effect of sexualizing the language: "For [Isherwood], the entire German language—all the way from the keep-off-the-grass signs in the park to Goethe's stanza on the wall—was irradiated with sex. For him, the difference between a table and *ein Tisch* was that a table was the dining table in his mother's house and *ein Tisch* was *ein Tisch* in the Cosy Corner" (21). Contrasting the banal domestic space of his mother's English home and the liberated sexual space of his favorite queer Berlin bar, the Cosy Corner, he implies an inherent difference between the nations themselves—one enables his sexual life and the other forecloses it. As the historian Robert Beachy writes, "Berlin's openness freed [Isherwood] not only to explore his homosexuality but ultimately to accept and embrace what he came to think of as a sexual orientation and identity" (x).

Isherwood's experiences of Berlin in the 1930s, recorded in his autobiography and reproduced in his popular novels *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939) and *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* (1935), together published as *The Berlin Stories*, are perhaps among the most famous recollections of this space and time.[1] However, while Isherwood may be "the chronicler of Weimar," as Beachy describes him, his experiences as a queer man in Berlin were by all accounts representative rather than exceptional (195). The Weimar Republic, as a historical designation, names the years between 1919, when a new constitution was adopted following the German Revolution of 1918-19, and 1933, when Hitler was sworn in as Chancellor, marking the beginning of the Nazi reign. (Weimar is the name of the German city near Leipzig where the new constitution was drafted and signed.) Scholars have long been interested in the unique confluence of sexual liberation, economic depredation, artistic renaissance, and international intermixture of

the Weimar period.[2] As the biographer Norman Page describes the political scene of the Weimar Republic in *Auden and Isherwood: The Berlin Years* (1998),

> Defeat, civil war, mass unemployment, stratospheric inflation, then, after a brief interval of prosperity, more economic troubles following the Wall Street Crash, and the tensions and bloodshed that accompanied the rise to power of the Nazis: any German who lived through this decade and a half might well have felt that he or she had supped full of horrors. It was, however, during the same years that Berlin became a centre of innovation and influence across a wide field of artistic, scientific and technological activity—from theatre to photography, from architecture to psychoanalysis, from sexology […] to television." (79)

What Page explains, essentially, is that Weimar Berlin encompassed both the best and worst of times in a city that was both enabling and punishing for its diverse residents.

Whether enabling or punishing, Weimar Berlin was a place and time of intense and rapid change, which permitted a certain kind of progressive urban life to flourish. Having grown exponentially throughout the nineteenth century, by the 1931 census, the population reached 4,288,700, making it the third largest city in the world, just behind London and New York (Page 61). Almost one-fifth of this four-million-plus population comprised people who were not native Germans (62). The city's population diversity was reflected not only by its vibrant artistic community, which many believed rivaled that of Paris, but also by its status as the railway center of Europe, burgeoning center for air travel, and designation as an important river port (61; 66). Both its size and its particular character made Berlin an especially welcome place for gays, lesbians, trans folks, and other gender non-conformists. Hirschfeld, who kept statistics on these populations within Berlin, estimated that nearly fifty to one hundred thousand Berliners were what he termed "sexual intermediaries," a term he used to encompass all the categories above (Beachy 197). Because of lax regulations, lesbian and gay bars proliferated in the city—there

were approximately one hundred such bars in Berlin in the early 1930s—and many kept their doors open almost round-the-clock (196).

Even as it was a welcoming place for sexual intermediaries and enjoyed a diverse population of foreign-born citizens, Weimar Berlin was economically unstable. In 1927, unemployment in Berlin was nearly three times as high as unemployment in the rest of Germany (Page 79). The city's growing population brought about a housing shortage, and many new immigrants lived in slums (79; 61). The open sex culture of Berlin, as much as Isherwood celebrates it in recollection, was in part a direct result of unemployment and economic instability. Since the eighteenth century, Berlin had been infamous as a place for male prostitution, and prostitution continued to be an important industry throughout the Weimar period, as some men and women turned to sex work out of deep economic need (Beachy 9). Sex tourism, too, was a major industry of Weimar Berlin for a number of reasons: the weakened German economy made the exchange rate favorable for visitors, the city was relatively indifferent to sex work and so the risk of exposure and punishment was low, and Berlin had a longstanding reputation as a city where sexual others were tolerated (219). This is, after all, the city that issued special passes (*Transvestitenschein*) to its transgender citizens beginning in 1909, at Hirschfeld's request, which protected any registered trans person from street harassment, assured them protection by the police, and safeguarded against police persecution (172).

In their nostalgia, neither Isherwood nor Soloway elide the trauma of Weimar Berlin's economic instability and political unrest. Nonetheless, both—as well as Geoffrey Sax, the director of Isherwood's biopic—uncover aspects of the Weimar past to celebrate in preference to what exists in the present. The German literary scholar Rolf Goebel argues that contemporary

Berlin novels by German writers also seek to recover memories of Weimar, which Goebel calls the "cultural reservoir" for Germany's "liberal modernity" (487). Describing a character in the German writer Friedrich Kröhnke's novel *Grundeis* (1989), Goebel points out, "what [he] really longs for is neither West nor East Berlin, but the city's mythic and undivided past […] the lost cultural vitality of Weimar Berlin, which for him is the only metropolis whose allure could possibly match the cosmopolitan attractions of Paris and other international centers of modern life" (489). Cosmopolitan Germany here is coextensive with Weimar Berlin, and Weimar Berlin offers an alternative to contemporary shame around Nazi complicity. Goebel also shows how Weimar Berlin serves German writers today by providing an origin story, a "legitimizing urban myth" for the progressive politics of contemporary Berlin. I argue that the strategy is somewhat different for American artists and writers who draw on the histories of Weimar Berlin. Rather than a through line to the present, what Berlin in the 1930s seems to provide Isherwood and Soloway are contrasts against which they can measure the failures of the American twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

"Berlin Meant Boys": Sexual Possibility and Diversity in *Christopher and His Kind*

Christopher and His Kind stars Matt Smith as Isherwood, Imogen Poots as Jean Ross, and Toby Jones as Gerald Hamilton. The film originally debuted in Britain on BBC2 in March 2011, followed by a premiere at the Frameline Festival, a gay film festival in San Francisco, in the summer of that year. It features all the hallmarks of a prototypical nostalgic biopic—period setting and costumes carefully curated, sentimental and cheerful soundtrack, and a frame story that captures the experience of an older author looking back at his past. The film's sometimes

idealistic depiction of Berlin in the years immediately before the Nazis came to power invites the viewer's nostalgia not only for a time before World War II but, more specifically, for the kinds of queer social and communal life existing in Berlin in those years. As a whole, *Christopher and His Kind* is inflected by a pre-emptive longing for what the characters correctly sense will soon pass away—a measure of social freedom for sexual minorities. The melancholy passage of time, the nostalgic backward glance at a lost world: these are central themes in *Christopher and His Kind*.

While the film is structured by nostalgia for 1930s Berlin, it retains resonances of the anxieties, fears, and losses of both the American 1970s, the place and time Isherwood wrote and published his autobiography, as well as the new queer millennium, in which the film version was produced and released. I argue that it is the post-Stonewall 1970s gay liberation movement that Isherwood's written narrative most clearly engages, although those concerns are complicated and textured by the 2011 adaptation to film. In either case, Isherwood's nostalgia—as an author and as a character—is that of a post-Stonewall gaze back to a pre-Stonewall moment of liberatory energy. The film's nostalgia—underwritten by Sax's direction—is that of a post-Stonewall gaze not only back to the sexual freedom of 1930s Berlin, but to the sexual freedom of Isherwood's moment in the 1970s, before AIDS and the spread of neoliberal globalization. In my Coda, I write at length about 1970s gay life in America (and, indeed, why that historical moment is especially susceptible to nostalgic feeling). For the purposes of this chapter, it is important to highlight that many of the characteristics of 1970s U.S. urban gay culture are precisely those values that Isherwood brings to the fore in his descriptions of Berlin: the celebration of non-monogamy and promiscuity, a culturally and linguistically diverse international population,

readily available sex workers, and a vibrant and diverse public sex culture. The film's moment of production was, in contrast, characterized by increased gay assimilation and, as Michael Warner has compellingly argued in *The Trouble with Normal* (1999), the foreclosure of almost all forms of public sex and sexual freedom.

Christopher and His Kind announces its interest in temporality early on. An antique clock appears and reappears throughout the film, a powerfully laden symbol of Christopher's connection to Berlin, his positive memories of that time, and the specificity of the space of the apartment building where he lived. (Of course, a clock is an obvious symbol of temporality; here, it renders the thematic focus of the film almost painfully evident.) He first encounters the clock when he takes a room in Frl. Thurau's lodging house. The viewer knows, however, that he was somehow later reunited with the clock because it appears on the older writer's desk as the camera pans across his fingers on the typewriter in the very first scene, accompanied by voiceover narration. Indeed, at the end of the film, Christopher refers to the clock as "another survivor." The clock, like the shots of the older Isherwood, filmed from behind as he sits at his desk, tie together the scenes, linking his past and present.[3] At several points throughout the film, the soft sound of a ticking clock marks the transition from the frame story of 1976 Los Angeles to the central flashback to 1930s Berlin.

Another function of the clock has to do with its thematic connection to Christopher's memories. We often see the clock just as Christopher is recording the day's events in his diary. The older Christopher tells us in his narration early in the film, "I destroyed my Berlin diaries, you see, so I've had to rely a good deal on memory."[4] In another scene, as Christopher records an interaction from earlier in the day with his neighbor Gerald, the voiceover recounts the scene

exactly as we have just watched it, and the camera pans down past the dolphin clock to Christopher, scribbling in a notebook, ostensibly writing down what we are hearing in voiceover.[5] Sax uses this strategy throughout the film, forging a relationship between the clock and Christopher's memories, the records of which are now lost to time in a way the clock is not. And the clock is ultimately more nostalgic than Christopher's recovered diaries could ever be. The emotional content of an object may be rich with complexity, but it nonetheless lacks the detail and specificity of a written record. In other words, the clock is a less factually dependable record of the period of time the film recounts. The clock, then, in certain ways enables Christopher's nostalgia for 1930s Berlin: he no longer possesses every detail, but the emotions structured by memory remain.

The workings of memory—and the representation of the process of memory—provide another avenue for exploring how nostalgia shapes the film. While in Berlin, Christopher works as a private English tutor. One of the students is a young German girl Frl. Schmidt, whom he tutors in his room at the lodging house. During a tutoring session, he quizzes her on various objects in the room, moving from the window to the dolphin clock (which she first names "fish," then "big fish," then "whale," not understanding that Christopher wants her to name the object the fish holds in its tail—a clock). Finally, he walks toward the bed. Pointing at it, then tapping on the footboard, he says, "And that, Frl. Schmidt? What is that?" She blushes, starts to giggle, does not answer, and turns away. Christopher smiles and looks the other direction, toward the bed, which is also toward the camera. As he silently recollects, we hear heavy breathing and watch the hat tree rattling next to the bed. The camera moves slowly across the bookshelf, also shaking, and then to the bed, where Christopher is having sex with Caspar, one of the two men

he dates during the course of the film. The music is cheerful. A potted plant on the bookshelf rattles and finally falls off. Caspar shouts, "Oh Christoph! This is how I'd like to die!" Exuberant almost to the point of irony, the lighthearted tone of the scene is underlined by Caspar's statement that he'd like to die in the act of sex with Christopher. The scene then turns emphatically humorous when we see Gerald spying through the keyhole in Christopher's door, watching Christopher and Caspar engaged in gymnastic sex. On the outside of the door, Frl. Mayr, a sex worker whose customers come in and out of the lodging house throughout the film, appears on the stairs wearing sheer lingerie, accepts her payment from an average-looking john, and marches back up the stairwell, puffing her cigarette. (We are reminded here, of course, of Zora Neale Hurston's defiant smoking in *Brother to Brother*, as she walked down the street with Richard Bruce Nugent. In both cases, smoking is an activity of the past made quaint by historical distance.) Moments later, as Christopher tries to sneak Caspar out of the building, he encounters the landlady Frl. Thurau, who says only, "How sweet love must be!," smiles playfully as she puts on her gloves, and walks downstairs. In this short scene, the film catalogs some of the range of sexual practices available to people living in this particular lodging house in Berlin at this particular historical moment. Frl. Mayr's sex work, Christopher's sex with various men, Gerald's sex with various men (including one encounter with a man dressed in leather, whipping Gerald from behind), Gerald's voyeurism, and Christopher's friend Jean's unmarried sex with her boyfriend Bobby are all treated more or less positively. In an ironic upending of expected historical narratives of normalcy, Caspar at one point exclaims to Christopher, as they are naked in bed together listening to the yodeling of an unseen upstairs neighbor, "Let us thank god, Christoph, that we are both normal!" This is a film in which sex of whatever kind, between

whomever, is simultaneously humorous, unremarkable, and joyous. As a result, viewers are implicitly encouraged to align ourselves with Frl. Thurau, observing with a grin before proceeding on our way.

Not only this particular scene, but the film as a whole is structured by memory—essentially, a flashback bookended by a frame story. As I explain in the introduction to this dissertation, the flashback is a common feature of nostalgic visual culture because it allows the audience to draw a connection (oftentimes, a comparison) between the past and the present. In the narrative's frame story, we see the older Christopher Isherwood in his home in Los Angeles, writing the book that would become *Christopher and His Kind*. We return to that frame story at various points throughout the film, but we never see Christopher's face; instead, we only see him from behind. The film shows us his aged hands typing and, as I pointed out above, puts on prominent display the clock that is so thematically important to the film. The older Christopher, with his back always turned to us, is estranged from the viewer in these scenes, analogously to the way Isherwood the writer constructing his autobiography is estranged from the reader of *Christopher and His Kind*. Throughout the autobiography, Isherwood writes of his Berlin self in the third person, while he writes of his authorial self in the first person. For example, here is what he says when he recounts Christopher's first visit to the Cosy Corner, a queer bar where Wystan Auden takes him on his first night in Berlin: "I now recognize it as one of the decisive events of my life. I can still make myself feel the delicious nausea of initiation terror which Christopher felt as Wystan pushed back the heavy leather door curtain of a boy bar called the Cosy Corner and led the way inside" (3). There is an almost out-of-body quality to this writing technique Isherwood deploys. He recollects his own life in much the way he might create a

character's life, though he can access those particular emotions with much more ease when it is his own experiences he is recalling. This disjunction between his later life and his young life serves the nostalgic tone of the film (and the autobiography): He visits the past in memory, picking up and putting down details, stringing them into a narrative that renders the past a very positive place to be. Isherwood says as much in his autobiography: "[Christopher] used to tell his friends that he had destroyed his real past because he preferred the simplified, more creditable, more exciting fictitious past which he had created to take its place. This fictitious past, he said, was the past he wanted to 'remember'" (41).[6] Though Isherwood does not use the word nostalgia here, he certainly proves himself to be a proponent of the feeling insofar as it is an essential ingredient for his imaginative recollections of the past.

Though most of the Berlin scenes occur in the lodging house, at the Cosy Corner (which feels dark and secreted but not unwelcoming as it is filmed here), or on the streets of the city, a handful of scenes are remarkable in their distinctly different setting: a pastoral lakeside. Christopher first visits the lake with Wystan and Caspar. The camera lingers on Caspar, his body glistening in a small swimsuit, as he towels himself off at the end of a long dock that reaches far out into the water. Sunlight floods these shots. At one point, Caspar stands in the foreground with the camera shooting upwards from below him. The sun shines behind his head, giving him a kind of halo. Taken together, the scene's features recall a biblical or mythological space of unsullied natural and physical beauty. Christopher and Wystan watch from the shade of a tree some distance off. There are other half-naked men laying in the grass all around them. Christopher comments to Wystan, "Coming to Berlin has been the first honest thing I've done in my life, and it's all thanks to you." No doubt in part to pacify Wystan, who has romantic feelings

for him, Christopher's comment is nonetheless important to the film's nostalgic theme: Berlin is weighted with positive associations for Christopher, both in the moment and in recollection.

Christopher returns to the lakeside setting with Heinz, his second and more serious romantic partner in the film. The film pulls us out of a violent scene of Nazi soldiers carrying torches down the nighttime streets and brings us back to the peaceful, pastoral setting. Immediately after meeting Heinz and asking him out for beer, we see the two men sunbathing on the same dock where Caspar previously was toweling off by himself. Heinz and Christopher lay on the dock with their heads next to each other, legs stretched out in opposite directions. The camera captures them from above, creating a balanced and elegant cinematic shot that would later appear on the DVD cover for the film. In this scene and a similar one that follows, the viewer watches Christopher and Heinz through grass, from some distance away, framed in a wide colorful shot. Faintly, we hear the sound of the water lapping against the shore and birds chirping. These scenes are in stark contrast to the scenes of Nazi soldiers on the streets of Berlin, which are shot with jerking, uneven camera movement, shots that capture only parts of the faces, bodies, and uniforms of the soldiers and that show us the action of the scene only as reflected in a store window by the light of the Nazi torches. The scenes feel terrifying, but they also feel nonspecifically terrifying (except insofar as the viewer knows the historical context). In Christopher's memory, Berlin in the years immediately before the Nazis took power is defined far less and very vaguely by moments such as the one, for instance, when he hides in the doorway of a building to avoid the marching soldiers than by his specific recollections of moments such as sunbathing on the dock with Heinz. This is the kind of story—a remarkably

nostalgic one—that a writer might tell if his recollections relied on an antique brass dolphin clockstand rather than a set of detailed journals.

The nostalgia of *Christopher and His Kind* is intricately bound to the specificity of space and place—the city of Berlin. Part of what makes *Christopher and His Kind* illustrative for the present argument is that it is not a generalized nostalgia for the past; rather, it is a specific nostalgia for a geographical location as much as it is for a historical moment. This is a film that is deeply interested in the shared space of the apartment building, the urban space of the city, and the space of the nation-state. Toward the end of the film, for example, Christopher reunites with his German former lover Heinz, who excitedly asks Christopher about America: "Tell me, there are skyscrapers in America? […] And you see Hollywood? […] And The Grand Canyon? You see that?" Other characters disappear from Berlin, or hope to, frequently hypothesizing what life would be like elsewhere: Jean, Christopher's closest friend, is a performer who naively believes her boyfriend will take her to America to make her famous; Gerald, Christopher's neighbor, has to leave Berlin after being beaten because he owed a man money. Moreover, one of the central thematic arcs of the film is Christopher's search for a home—first in Berlin, then later back in England, and finally in the U.S.[7] At one point while on the coast of England after his return from Berlin, Isherwood tells Auden, "I don't belong here. I'm not sure I belong anywhere. I rather like being a foreigner." Location—and characters relationship to location—are vital to the nostalgic story the film tells about Isherwood's life.

Some of that nostalgia troublingly circulates around Christopher's affinity for foreign men and the film's parallel affinity for the globalization of sexual life. Christopher goes to Berlin in large part to experience a kind of sexual freedom he cannot access in England: as he says in

the opening scene of the film, he went there because "Berlin meant boys." Despite uncountable Nazi atrocities, one atrocity that this film mourns is that the start of World War II would make mostly impossible civilian travel between England and Germany. This is a problem for Christopher because he understands his sexuality not only as directed toward those of the same sex but, perhaps just as importantly, as directed toward those of the working class and those who do not share his national origin. In this respect, his sexual landscape is composed somewhat similarly to Walt Whitman's, who eroticized the working class (such as his lover Peter Doyle, who we meet in the episode of *Dr. Quinn* I wrote about in chapter one) and, to some extent, men of diverse ethnicities, even if Whitman's conception of them was at least partially structured by an imperial impulse. As Isherwood scholar Timothy K. Nixon writes, "the realization that homosexuality spans national borders and social classes was an epiphany for Isherwood when he first visited Germany in 1929, and it would prove critical to his slowly developing activist spirit" (14). Homosexuality, for Christopher—and here I mean specifically the filmic representation of him, but also the author himself—is necessarily transnational and cross-class.

With this in mind, the film's nostalgia for Berlin in the early 1930s becomes more fraught. For example, a contemporary viewer may cringe when Christopher muses, after meeting his German street-sweeper boyfriend Heinz, that he had finally found someone "innocent, vulnerable, and uncritical, a boy [he] could protect and cherish as [his] own." As I argue more extensively in chapter two, primitivism oftentimes accompanies nostalgia, which complicates how much the emotion can be recuperated. In this case, the backward-looking celebration of Berlin's past—its sexual permissiveness, its relative freedom, its sexual diversity and

intermixing—must be held in tension with the film's tendency to position Christopher as the British savior of his younger, poorer, German boyfriend.

Though interwar Germany was not a colonized space, its economic, governmental, and social stability had been severely compromised by the Treaty of Versailles that marked the end of World War I. For this reason, Weimar Berlin may not have felt like a coherent nation-state to Isherwood when he arrived. His native England, however, certainly did feel like a coherent nation-state, and it felt suffocating on that basis. For Isherwood, queerness must be found outside the nation and outside the family, which are inextricably tied. The sometimes tense relationship between queerness and family life is even more central to the themes of Amazon Prime's television series *Transparent*, to which I now turn.

What Can't Be Smuggled Across the Ocean in a Bar of Soap: Gay, Queer, and Trans* History in Amazon's *Transparent*

Transparent, created and produced by Jill Soloway, has been hailed for its sensitive depiction of the late-life gender transition of the father and retired academic Maura Pfefferman (formerly Mort). Soloway's show, which draws from her own experiences as the child of a transgender parent, recently completed its second season. *Transparent* is a qualitatively different television text than *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, which I wrote about in chapter one. Soloway's series is, among other things, almost two decades more recent than *Dr. Quinn*, filmed at a much slower pace than the older series (ten episodes compared to twenty-two or more per year), intended for a self-selecting audience (those who pay for Amazon Prime's service), and not generally geared toward a family viewership (*Transparent* depicts sex and nudity openly, and the language is not edited for broadcast). *Transparent*, like many new television series that stream

online, does not use commercial breaks as television traditionally has, nor is it subject to the same kinds of pressure from advertisers, who have historically been hesitant to connect themselves to risky or controversial shows. In simpler terms, it would be fair to say, in the 1997 television moment of *Dr. Quinn*, *Transparent* would never have been put before an audience. One characteristic that does remain, however, is the episodic nature of television as opposed to film and novels. Viewers develop an emotional connection to characters over a number of episodes and a number of seasons.

The second season of *Transparent*, like the first, follows the lives of, not only Maura, but also her ex-wife Shelly and their three children, Sarah, Josh, and Ali. However, unlike the first, the second season features a parallel story, one set not among the upper-class white Los Angelenos of 2016 but among the gender non-conforming, gay, queer, and trans* folks living and working at Magnus Hirschfeld's famous Institute of Sex Research in 1933 Berlin. In these scenes, a young woman we eventually learn is Maura's mother, Rose, is torn between her own conservative mother Yetta, who is trying to procure visas so that the family can move to the United States, and her transgender sister Gittel, who lives at Hirschfeld's institute and has a strained relationship with Yetta.

The opening credits of the show's second season—which use the same theme music as the original credits, but mostly different visual content—imply historical continuity rather than progress, in keeping with one of the themes of the season. Images retained from the original credits reappear, comprising some of the color portions of the sequence: a boy dances at a bar mitzvah, a woman wearing a sequined gown walks across a stage, three children light a candle. Interspersed throughout are shots in black and white film that appear, based on the attire of the

people in the shots and the quality of the shots themselves, to be from sometime between the World Wars: an immigrant disembarks a boat and runs to meet a male companion waiting on the shore, two women dance together, a group of women ride bikes along a shore, two women embrace while wearing wedding outfits, audience members applaud a performance, immigrants board a boat, and a few women stand on the side of a boat watching the Statue of Liberty in the distance.[8] Three of these black and white shots are followed by a companion shot in color. In addition to their adjacent placement, which suggests that they should be read as part of a pair with the shot that precedes them, each color shot echoes the content and/or the composition of the preceding shot. The companion color shot for the women biking depicts a group of women riding motorcycles down a city street, perhaps as part of a parade. The companion color shot for the immigrants boarding a boat depicts a lesbian feminist protest march, likely from the 1970s. The companion color shot for the trio of women gazing at the Statue of Liberty from the side of a boat depicts a pair of women holding hands as they walk down the street. These paired shots echo and foreshadow the cross-temporal and transnational concerns of the entire season.

There is a certain narrative of (white) queer life across the late twentieth century that is widely repeated in popular historical accounts: Our ancestors immigrated to the United States, escaping oppressive political regimes, in order to offer their children and grandchildren personal and sexual freedom, one of which is the freedom to be queer. This narrative serves contemporary leftists by suggesting that our modern sexual permissiveness is an improvement over the repression of the "old" world, but it also serves contemporary conservatives who want to deploy it as a means to point out what a waste has become of the sacrifices of those who immigrated to America with little and, so the story goes, built their lives from nothing. *Transparent*'s second

season's opening credit sequence and its 1933 Berlin flashbacks offer a different way to understand the relationship between the queer past and the queer present. One of the signal qualities of this relationship is a surprisingly nostalgic depiction of 1930s Berlin, which is structured not by a progressive contrast—things are so much better now that we can all be queer in the contemporary U.S.—but by parallel—the struggles of our ancestors living in the past bore some similarities to our own. Beyond mere parallel, though, many of the scenes highlight the fact that, until the Nazis attained full control of the political scene, the open culture of Berlin allowed the patients and members of Hirschfeld's Institute—gay people, transgender people, gender non-conforming people, other sexual minorities—a degree of personal and social freedom they would never again have. In one of the flashbacks, a tour guide shows a group around Hirschfeld's Institute: "Welcome to the Institute for Sexual Research, where we believe that a wide range of sexualities, including homosexuality, are normal. Cross-dressers, transvestites, hermaphrodites, everyone is welcome here. Open-minded folks, such as yourselves, can understand the need for a safe haven for those of us who are neither male nor female, as you understand them." What is remarkable is the uncontested assumption, based on the nods and polite attention of the visitors taking the tour, that the straight population of 1933 Berlin is indeed open-minded and understanding. *Transparent*'s second season forces us to question the taken-for-granted notion not only that the contemporary is the historical moment par excellence of queerness, but also that the United States is necessarily its location par excellence.

In *Transparent*, Berlin in the early 1930s is the scene of queer freedom—not Poland, from which Rose, Gittel, and Yetta emigrated a few years before, and not the United States, where we see Yetta and Rose in the final episode. In the Berlin flashbacks, Yetta struggles to

assimilate to Berlin life, while her daughters assimilate easily. In one scene, Yetta asks—virtually begs—her younger daughter Rose to take her to a U-Bahn station to teach her how to use the underground transit system to get around the city. She is afraid of the U-Bahn, she tells Rose and Gittel, because she heard that passing through the turnstiles has been known to break women's pelvises. Of course, a hypothetical broken pelvis here is more than simply a hypothetical broken pelvis. The body part's particular attachment, both biologically and symbolically, to motherhood and child-bearing frames Yetta's worries about herself and her daughters in the urban space of Berlin—the fear that she is insufficient to the task of parenting her children in Berlin and, further, that Berlin life will cause her younger daughter to become uninterested in motherhood and encourage her to forego a traditional family life in favor of the more modern, sexually permissive, socially free lifestyle offered by the city. The scene resonates with one of literary studies scholar Julie Abraham's central arguments in *Metropolitan Lovers: The Homosexuality of Cities (2009)*, in which she shows how the queer subject came to be understood as, not only the prototypical urban dweller, but an avatar of the city itself. Like the early twentieth-century homosexual, the city destabilizes gender norms and can function without the constraints of patriarchal family life. Abraham, mapping the intersections of gender and sexual nonconformity in urban spaces through readings of the sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, summarizes: "[t]he city, long identified with gender confusion, might foster perversity, yet it is clearly identified with perversion as well" (95).[9] With Abraham's argument in mind, I argue that it is precisely what Yetta finds so unappealing about Berlin that makes it a welcome home for Gittel, who is transgender, and Rose, who is young and open to new experiences. It is no coincidence, then, that the trio has temporarily landed, without their patriarch, in an urban

locale that Yetta fears and disdains, which is where her son Gershon begins to live as a woman. For Yetta, Gittel is concomitant with Berlin, and both are deeply threatening to her conception of female identity.

Without doubt, the Berlin we see in *Transparent*'s flashbacks is a place and time for which many contemporary queer people might rightly feel nostalgic (and for many of the same reasons Yetta cannot wait to leave). The first Berlin segment we see underlines the city's historical openness—an openness we might tentatively label as "queer." As the contemporary Pfefferman clan celebrate a doomed gay wedding between oldest daughter Sarah and her controlling, socially inept girlfriend in episode one, the wedding party's dance is intercut with a very different scene of dancing—a party at Hirschfeld's Institute—that starkly contrasts the wealthy, white, neoliberal ritual of the California gay wedding. We see Gittel for the first time in this flashback, though we do not yet know who she is. Around her neck, she wears a long, gold necklace chain, attached to which is a gold and pearl ring that dangles as she dances. Throughout the season, this ring serves a symbolic purpose similar to that of Isherwood's dolphin clock stand in *Christopher and His Kind*, linking the past and the present through an object weighted with meaning. In the present, the ring is a mystery to the Pfefferman children, who know only that one of their relatives brought it from Europe. Believing, as his sisters do, that the ring is indeed a wedding ring, Josh at one point asks his girlfriend Raquel to wear it as a stand-in until he can get her a proper ring of her own. Eventually, the ring winds up in the possession of the youngest Pfefferman, Ali, who wears it when she goes to visit her grandmother Rose in the nursing home. In a poignant moment, as Rose meets Maura, formerly her son Mort, for the first time, she reaches out and grabs the ring dangling from the chain around Ali's neck. The irony, of course, is

that this ring, which everyone assumes is symbolic of the bond of marriage and the patriarchal family that marriage enables, is actually symbolic of the bond between the sisters Rose and Gittel. Gittel gifts Rose the ring on the chain immediately before the Institute is raided. Yetta preserves the ring in a bar of soap that she later breaks open and gives to Rose, who is mourning the loss of her sister, as the two of them ride below decks on a boat bound for the States. The fact that the show's second season begins with a lesbian wedding in the present only redoubles the symbolic import of this ring that is not a wedding ring, this ring that has been queered from the beginning—first by its removal from the hand to the neck, then by its status as stowaway inside a bar of soap, then by its tenure as a "pretend" wedding ring for a heterosexual couple, and ultimately by its eventual home around the neck of Ali, the Pfefferman child whose affective connection to her family's past is most dynamic.[10] By all accounts, this ring is not beautiful or economically valuable, but for the viewer who watches the Berlin flashbacks, it registers as a tangible symbol of loss of the queer, gay, and trans* culture of Berlin in those years.

Toward the end of the season, in lush sepia tones, the cinematographers capture the scene of a party and a performance, both structured by nostalgia. The period costuming is at once accurate and heightened, underlining the fluid and performative nature of gender as it is embodied by the Institute's residents. At a party during a flashback sequence from episode eight, Rose and Gittel drink, joke, and dance with each other and other partygoers. In one shot, we see a group of people on the floor in a pile, in various stages of undress, some caressing the body parts of others. Our Lady J, a trans* performer and writer who works on *Transparent*, sings the German version of "Someone to Watch Over Me" as she plays the piano. Everyone moves slowly and deliberately, as gracefully as if they were underwater. In the foreground, Rose dances

alone for some minutes, then boldly cuts in on a couple who are dancing together, first dancing with one, then the other, then both. Eventually, she lies down on a chaise lounge, where Gittel finds her, and they lie together, embracing. In the following scene, Rose leaves her mother's home to return to the Institute for a play, where Gittel performs in a campy revision of the creation myth of Adam and Eve.

Keeping in mind the musical selection and the sepia tones of the camera work, one of the objectives of these scenes is to portray a fully realized world, the loss of which the viewer will necessarily mourn. When Yetta appears at the Institute to tell Gittel and Rose that she has secured the visas they need in order to emigrate to the U.S., it makes sense that Gittel rejects the possibility of emigration. In Berlin, she is protected by a city pass that Hirschfeld secured for all of the transgender and gender non-conforming patients at his Institute, which allows her to move about the city without being arrested and with full expectation of police intervention if she is harassed. In contrast, the invitation to the U.S. that Yetta offers her is a visa that bears the name she relinquished when she began to live as a woman— "It says Gershon. Do you have a visa for Gittel?" Yetta, who believes unshakably that things will be better in the U.S., tells Gittel, "Today you're Gittel, tomorrow you can be Edith, after that you can be a fucking lobster. Change your name when you get to America, please." Yetta's America is a place of possibility, even for her transgender daughter. While we know that Gittel's choice to stay in Berlin will turn tragic, we eventually find out that Yetta's decision take Rose to the U.S. will turn tragic as well. When, after a long and uncomfortable boat trip across the Atlantic, Yetta finally locates her husband in Los Angeles, she learns that he has married someone else and fathered a child. The America of

Yetta's dreams does not exist: she arrives to find herself without the husband she thought she had and without the child she left behind.

America is not idealized in the contemporary scenes, either. In the present, Maura goes to a women's music festival with her daughters Ali and Sarah. What the three women initially do not realize is that one of the festival's policies states that only "women born women" are allowed on the campgrounds during the festival.[11] As soon as Maura learns about this policy, explicitly intended to exclude transwomen and other genderqueer people, she finds Ali and insists that they leave at once. As their disagreement about whether to leave ensues, a group of older lesbians, one of whom is a lesbian professor with a longstanding professional conflict with Maura, watches the exchange. Ali finally persuades Maura to sit by the campfire with the group and drink a beer. Soon, conversation turns to the festival's "women born women only" policy. The women at the campfire reveal that, not only do they support the policy, they helped author it. Faced with intolerance in what she had presumed would be a safe space, Maura panics and leaves. Later, as she screams, "man on the land!"—the cry meant to warn the festivalgoers when a male is nearby—she tries unsuccessfully to find her other daughter Sarah, then packs her things and begins walking out of the campgrounds. In the Berlin flashback that immediately follows, Nazi soldiers arrive to raid Hirschfeld's Institute. Intercut with shots of Maura destroying her campsite are shots of the Nazis ripping books out of shelves, taunting and harassing the Institute's residents, and finally running out into the street to start a fire with the books as kindling. Back in the present, Maura walks away from her tent with her suitcase, yelling, "This woman is leaving this feminist fuckhole! Thank you for your kindness and fuck you!" As the line between the past and the present thins and ultimately disappears, we see Ali, searching for

Maura, come upon the book burning, which has been imaginatively transported to the present. She watches with Rose as, on the other side of the fire, the soldiers arrest Gittel and drag her away.

These parallel scenes of violence and oppression occur on very different terms and in different historical contexts. And, indeed, the parallel between the past and the present are an ongoing thematic concern of the season. However, the contrast between past and present—a contrast in favor of the past—is at play here as well. In the past, the destruction of Hirschfeld's Institute means not only the loss of knowledge and information, but of the entire culture that the Institute enabled. This destruction is rendered bitterly ironic given Hirschfeld's speech to Yetta in episode eight: "I believe in science, I believe in truth, I believe in reason, in progress. Look; look around. You're in my library, you're next to my museum, you're underneath my medical ward. You make fun. *This* is the future!" But "this"—a rational, progressive, scientific understanding of sexual difference based on the philosophies of the Enlightenment and liberal tolerance—did not turn out to be the future, either in the short term, as we soon see his Institute destroyed, or in the long term, as we witness Maura's traumatic experience at the music festival, where she unwittingly endangers herself by entering a space where she is not welcomed—where, in fact, her presence is explicitly prohibited.

Historical parallel turns to nostalgia on the basis of the source of the oppression Gittel and Maura face. In the flashback, trans* lives are threatened by forces from outside the community. The Nazis, both those in soldiers' uniforms and those in starched white button-ups and slacks, are starkly and obviously distinct from the community at Hirschfeld's Institute. In contrast, Maura's life is threatened—and it is indeed threatened, if more insidiously because

more subtly—by lesbian feminists who Maura assumed would support her. This potentially inflammatory analogy links the book-burning Nazis to the 1970s-era American lesbian feminists. While I hesitate to embrace such an analogy, it certainly performs important thematic work in the episode. The contrast between these two scenes of discursive and literal violence dramatizes the fracturing of the trans* and gay communities, a scenario we see illustrated in the unwillingness of the older lesbians to offer their support to Maura. Under Hirschfeld's designation "sexual intermediaries," Maura and the older lesbians might have found common cause, just as the gays, lesbians, trans* folks at Hirschfeld's Institute do in the flashback sequences. (Hirschfeld's work, after all, attempted to account for myriad experiences of sexual non-normativity, and he himself was primarily homosexual in his sexual and romantic attachments.) In the present, however, Maura and the older lesbians are adversaries. The series is careful not to imply that Maura suffers more than Gittel and other sexual outlaws who lived in 1933 Berlin—even Maura's daughter Ali points out that, while Maura may have been struggling internally when she was forced to live as Mort, she nonetheless benefitted from her status as a straight white male—nostalgia, grounded in the diversity and unity of the community at Hirschfeld's Institute, is one of the signal qualities of *Transparent*'s second season.

Hirschfeld's "Sexual Intermediaries," Biological Essentialism, and Dreams of Community

While Hirschfeld's term, "sexual intermediaries," may feel quaint or archaic—and it is certainly anachronistic—it signals an important trait of 1930s Berlin around which the nostalgia of *Transparent* and, to a lesser extent, *Christopher and His Kind*, circulates. Hirschfeld is a link between Gittel's story and Isherwood's. Gittel works at Hirschfeld's Institute when we see her in

Transparent's Berlin flashbacks, and we are given to believe that she lives there as well. Though he does not appear in the film *Christopher and His Kind*, Hirschfeld and Isherwood were no doubt acquainted during Isherwood's time in Berlin. Isherwood lived for a time in the apartments on the grounds of the Institute, on the floor directly above the medical residents and below the sex outlaws housed by Hirschfeld while they awaited their trials (Page 72).

Beachy argues in *Gay Berlin* (2014) that the modern popular notion of sexual orientation as fixed, innate, and biological originated during the Weimar period. Beachy likewise traces the liberatory energies of this historical moment to our modern era, where he finds many of the same ideas about sexual difference at play. "This confluence of biological determinism and subjective expressions of sexual personhood," he writes, "was a uniquely German phenomenon, moreover, and it clearly underpins modern conceptions of sexual orientation" (xiv). For Beachy, Weimar Berlin's gay culture is the ideological precursor to today's American gay political scene.

Biological determinism, the subjectivity of experience, and political activism for increased tolerance were not only uniquely German phenomena—they were uniquely Hirschfeld phenomena. For most of his life, Hirschfeld protested against Paragraph 175 of the German Penal Code, which specified punishment for men who engaged in homosexual acts. He was known throughout Europe as, in Isherwood's words, "a leading expert on homosexuality" (17). But he was not single-minded in his focus, particularly later in his life. His Institute was among the first to provide hormone treatments and rudimentary sex-reassignment procedures to those we now call transgender and offered counseling to heterosexuals who were suffering from sexual disorders (Beachy 160; 163). The term, "sexual intermediaries," that served Hirschfeld so well, was not, I argue, merely a quaint linguistic tick; it indicates Hirschfeld's desire to foster

understanding of various forms of sexual outlawry and to bring justice to many different kinds of sexual outlaws.

Beachy shows that Hirschfeld was not alone in his activism around gay issues. The German writer and political activist Adolf Brand's Community of the Special likewise pressed for sexual justice for queer people, but on very different terms. Brand's philosophies idealized the male sexual relationships prevalent in Ancient Greece, eschewed scientific exploration of sexuality, obsessed itself with virile masculinity, and evinced anti-Semitic tendencies. The German writer and publisher Friedrich Radszuweit's Human Rights League, which also shared some of the goals of Brand's and Hirschfeld's organizations, was ultimately a commercial enterprise (231). Radszuweit believed that buying power and capitalist influence were essential in achieving justice for sexual minorities, so he focused on entrepreneurship by encouraging the development of gay publications and theatres (234). He rejected the notion that homosexuality was an inherently radical or countercultural position.

That Hirschfeld's beliefs continue to have the most resonance now is certainly not coincidental, though it is surprising in a few respects. Contemporary gay culture is not without the Brandian tendency to idealize the masculine, nor is it without the Radszuweitan tendency to pursue political change through capitalist means. Hirschfeld's seamless conjunction of sexual essentialism and dreams of a diverse community of sexual outlaws lends itself well to contemporary mainstream political projects that promote acceptance for both queer and trans* people. His belief in the basic immutability of sexual orientation resonates with our contemporary born-this-way moment, but the coalition he imagined among a panoply of sexual and gender nonconformists is a utopian vision that remains unachieved. In that respect,

Hirschfeld's hopes serve as a contrast to the failures of our current moment, in which the schism between the gay and lesbian community and the trans* community sometimes seems unbreachable.[12]

As in chapter two, in which nostalgia for a community of black queer artists underwrites Perry's sense of the insufficiencies of the present, this chapter shows how nostalgia for pre-WWII Berlin underwrites our contemporary anxiety around the fracturing of gay and lesbian communities from trans* communities. In one way or another, community—in its affiliative, diverse, and strategic senses—animates the nostalgia of all these chapters. In the coda, I turn to another kind of nostalgic longing for community, one that is structured by grief and visualizes an alliance between the living and the dead.

[1] It would be difficult to overstate just how much Isherwood's memories of Weimar Berlin have shaped broader cultural memories of that time and place. In other words, Beachy calls him the "chronicler of Weimar" not without reason (195). Isherwood's *Berlin Stories* were first adapted into a Broadway play, *I Am a Camera*, in 1951. Perhaps the most famous adaptations, however, are the 1966 Broadway musical *Cabaret* and subsequent feature film of the same name, released in 1972. Soloway alludes to the centrality of Isherwood in creating the cultural historical record of Weimar in a brief scene between Pfefferman daughter Ali and her girlfriend Syd. Ali comments, "My people came from Germany—Berlin, and then left in the 30s." Immediately, Syd cheerfully responds, "That's Weimar! Like, *Cabaret*!" Here, Soloway seems to be acknowledging that, for contemporary Americans, whether we realize it or not, our imagination of Weimar Berlin is defined by Isherwood's legacy.

[2] Standard-bearing Weimar Berlin histories include Gay, Gordon, and Marhoefer.

[3] The clock also appears in the 1976 autobiography, in which Isherwood refers to himself in the third person: "the brass dolphin clock stand, holding a clock in its tail, which is described in *Goodbye to Berlin* and about which 'Isherwood' asks himself: 'What becomes of such things? How could they ever be destroyed?' A prophetic comment—for a bomb blast had hurled it across the room and only slightly scratched its green marble base. It stands ticking away on my desk, as good as new, while I write these words" (131-32).

[4] What Isherwood does not say in this scene is that he had more than his memory to depend on—he could and did also refer to his published collection *The Berlin Stories* (1945).

[5] I was unable to find out with any certainty whether this clock, in either its written or filmed version, is original to the 1930s or whether it was already antique in the 1930s. Based on its style, it is likely meant to register a 1930s-era vintage, then appear antique in the 1970s frame story scenes.

[6] Later in that passage, Isherwood the older author admits that he wishes he still had his Berlin diaries because they would offer an exactness that the novelized version of events, *Goodbye to Berlin*, lacks. (41).

[7] Isherwood's journey from England to Germany to the U.S. may suggest its own kind of progress narrative of queerness, from the old world to the new. In this scene, then, the U.S. is briefly reinstantiated as the international home of queerness.

[8] Recall my discussion in chapter two about the documentary quality of black and white film. In the case of *Transparent*, this documentary quality lends a sense of verisimilitude to the narrative.

[9] Abraham is not specifically writing about Berlin in this passage, although Berlin is one among the cities she groups together—Paris, New York, Rome, London, Amsterdam, Chicago—as especially deeply connected to the homosexual.

[10] For Ali, the line between the present and the past becomes razor-thin; at one point, she follows Yetta into the woods, where she witnesses the Nazis burning Hirschfeld's books and dragging Gittel away while she watches with Rose.

[11] In the early 1990s, controversy arose at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival because of the festival's so-called "women-born women only" policy. Transwomen and their allies were offended by the exclusionary policy, which its creators claimed was an effort to protect festival-goers who had been the victims of sexual violence. This episode of *Transparent* is almost certainly a fictionalized version of this real-life conflict.

[12] Gay scholar Daniel Harris's anti-trans manifesto "The Sacred Androgen: The Transgender Debate" is just one example of this cultural conflict.

CODA

Nostalgia, A Queer Mode of Grief

I.

However much it may celebrate the period of free love that it names in its title, *Gay Sex in the 70s*, a 2005 documentary directed by Joseph Lovett, is ultimately an elegy for friends and lovers who died too young. From one angle, it is ironic—though, for anyone with more than a passing knowledge of gay history, appropriate—that this story of the joyous sexual excesses in the years immediately following Stonewall ultimately becomes a story about grief. The recollections of happy times before AIDS are tinted by tacit acknowledgment of the large-scale tragedy that would soon ensue, rendering those positive recollections bittersweet, marked both by a longing for a moment that can never be recaptured and by a joy at having experienced that moment. Rather than deploying these narratives of sexual excess and freedom as moralistic warnings, many of the subjects of the documentary instead tell stories about their dead friends as a way to mourn what has been lost, both personally and culturally. Indeed, the documentary itself models how nostalgia—the desire to transport oneself back to the loved past in preference to the imperfect and limiting present—can function as a queer mode of grief.

From the first moments of the film, we know that the story of the debaucherous gay 1970s is just as much a story about the rampant death and destruction that beset the gay community beginning in 1981. In fact, the title, *Gay Sex in the 70s*, accrues its meaning only in and through the viewer's knowledge of what came after. The desire, stated or unstated, that no doubt sparks any decision to watch a film titled *Gay Sex in the 70s*—a desire to time travel back to a moment before AIDS—is not immediately satisfied. Rather, the film opens in an elegiac

mode, lingering on grainy old photographs. There is a price of admission: to go back, the viewer must be willing to grieve what has been lost.

Even before the opening title card, the film reveals that grief and loss will be its central themes. Early in the film, Barton Benes, an artist and one of the documentary's subjects, shows Lovett, the filmmaker, a collection of tiles on his kitchen table. As the camera zooms in on the tiles, the only audible sounds are Barton's voice and the soft clicking of the tiles clinking together. Each jagged-edged tile, slightly smaller than palm-sized, shows a photograph of a man trapped in time—puffy 70s hair, big sunglasses, mustaches and beards. Barton moves the tiles around, shuffling them slowly, showing several dozen different faces on tiles of various shapes. He says to Lovett, "You probably know a lot of these people. Yeah, these are friends of mine. I don't have everybody; I just have the ones I have photographs of." (Later, Barton will tell us that the tile he keeps on the top is the pile is the one bearing the picture of his longtime lover Howard.) Lovett asks, "What's the concept?" Barton tells him, "Memory. You know, like you find pottery shards, memories of civilization." Toward the end of the documentary, we witness a few more seconds from this same interview, creating bookends for the nostalgic journey of the intervening seventy-five minutes. In this scene, the camera catches Barton again moving the tiles around on his kitchen table, slowly picking them up and putting them down. He says, "Yeah, these are friends of mine, who all died," and as he says this, he pauses and clears his throat softly, "Of AIDS."

II.

Though the causes of grief are many, there are some ways of grieving that remain pathologized. Nostalgia is one of those ways. To take up a nostalgic position—to insist on

returning to the place and time before loss, to linger imaginatively in a past that no longer exists, to reject the notion of "getting better" and "moving on"—is to put oneself in conflict with the normative schedules of loss to which we are expected to adhere. When we respond to loss by sending ourselves back in time, we fail to conform to the expectations of productive, healthy grief. We become inconvenient to others and ill-suited to life as a liberal citizen-mourner who struggles and overcomes. In this sense, queer nostalgia as a mode of grief gives new meaning to the by-now old definition of queerness as a rejection of sociality and relationality.

In "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), Freud develops a framework for differentiating the two concepts. By the terms of the contrast that structures his essay, while mourning and melancholia may arise out of similar "exciting causes," melancholia is failed—or, more precisely, unsuccessful and pathological—mourning. In mourning, the psyche realizes that a love-object is gone (in the case of mourning, "gone" typically means "died") [243]. While the mourning psyche may initially resist the fact of loss, and while the path toward full understanding of loss may be long and arduous, the path is not, as in the case of melancholia, "blocked" (257). Melancholia, on the other hand, may be caused by loss through death, but it may also be caused by the loss of what Freud calls an "ideal"—a concept such as romantic love, or an attachment to the possibility of romantic love, for instance, such that a rejection from a beloved is understood as a loss, though the beloved is not dead (245). The melancholic so identifies with the object of his loss that his loss is turned inward and is rendered externally as self-hatred. Though Freud writes that both mourning and melancholia may subside "after a certain time has elapsed without leaving traces," he admits that it is impossible to know the precise course of events that bring about the dissipation of either (252).

Freud's contrast between mourning and melancholia, though it is more empathetic than my summary suggests, nonetheless asserts a value system whereby mourning is the preferred path to take when met with loss.[1] There is also the sense that mourning is connected to work and process, normative Western values: "The fact is," he writes, "when the *work* of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again" (245; my emphasis). In other words, in mourning, the psyche undertakes a project, completes it by process, and moves on. But if we know that melancholia will also eventually dissipate, then why does mourning accrue such value in a system where melancholia is understood as lesser? Part of this answer lies in the implication that melancholia is not "work," but another part certainly lies in melancholia's association with narcissism, the unconscious, and the displacement of loss onto the self. I hesitate to over-determine the alignment of melancholia with nostalgia, but they certainly share some important features, particularly their resistance to "work" and "process." Marcos Natali, a theorist of nostalgia, argues that nostalgia is a type of melancholia: "a version of nostalgia continues to define abnormality: while mourning is the healthy reaction to loss, melancholia is pathological" (19). In mourning, the subject comes to accept the loss and move on, while melancholia is a "regressive impulse and pathological inability to progress" (19).[2] Even if melancholia and nostalgia are not precisely the same—melancholia's residence in the unconscious, for instance, is one notable difference—nonetheless I argue that Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" has enabled and underwritten our contemporary resistance to nostalgia as a viable, legitimate form of grief. Following Freud, we too often accept that, like the umbrella term melancholia, nostalgia is pathological, too easy, and lacks a discernable (scientific, psychological) process. And, further,

we accept that, if that is the case, we must never grieve from a nostalgic position, or at least not acknowledge it if we do.

In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud's definition of melancholia as failed or stunted grief serves as contrast to the process-based orientation of melancholia's "proper" alternative, mourning. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, whose widely-cited theorization of grief's stages was for many years the standard-bearer in the subfield of psychology that deals with end-of-life concerns, likewise emphasizes the progressive nature of proper, healthy grief.[3] Primarily implicitly but occasionally explicitly, Kübler-Ross's first book, *On Death and Dying* (1969), charts the way a person moves through a process of grieving from beginning to end—suggesting that, indeed, grief *must* be moved through from beginning to end. The organization of the book belies the process-based nature of her theory: after two introductory chapters, chapter III is titled "First Stage: Denial and Isolation," followed by chapter IV, "Second Stage: Anger," chapter V, "Third Stage: Bargaining," chapter VI, "Fourth Stage: Depression," and, finally, chapter VII, "Fifth Stage: Acceptance." In a 2005 follow-up, *On Grief and Grieving*, co-written with David Kessler while Kübler-Ross herself was terminally ill, she explains how reactions to *On Death and Dying* suggest that her earlier work was widely misunderstood by professionals and laypeople alike. By way of correction and clarification, she writes that the five stages "were never meant to help tuck messy emotions into neat packages. They are responses to loss that many people have, but there is not a typical response to loss, as there is no typical loss. Our grief is as individual as our lives" (7).

Despite Kübler-Ross's clarification, it is easy to see how her five stages were misunderstood as more like an exact recipe than a loose and tentative mapping. At the start of

each chapter, she generalizes to the population of her study, claiming, for instance, "Among the over two hundred patients we have interviewed, *most* reacted […]" (36; my emphasis). In some chapters, she uses the first-person plural as a way to sweep everyone, including herself, into a group movement through the five stages: "If *we* […] have been angry at people and God in the second phase, maybe *we* can succeed into entering into some sort of agreement which may postpone the inevitable" (72; my emphasis). Finally, as she describes the fifth stage, acceptance, she indicates that the person who reaches this stage will have already passed through the previous four stages. In a satisfied tone, she describes the grieving person ending up at the final stage, acceptance:

> He will have been able to express his previous feelings, […] his anger at those who do not have to face their end so soon. He will have mourned the impeding loss of so many meaningful people and places and he will contemplate his coming end with a certain degree of quiet expectation. […] He will also have a need to doze off or to sleep often. [However, this] is not a sleep of avoidance or a period of rest to get relief from pain, discomfort, or itching. […] It is not a resigned and hopeless 'giving up,' a sense of 'what's the use' or 'I just cannot fight it any longer' (99)

In these passages, Kübler-Ross implies that grief is a process with a given number of stages, which people move through in more or less expected order. Further, her gratification at watching her imagined patient reach the stage of acceptance indicates that she imagines the passage through these stages as requiring commitment and work on the part of the part of the patient.

In 1944, even before Kübler-Ross, the bereavement psychiatrist Erich Lindemann coined the term "grief work," emphasizing the labor-intensive nature of the process as he understood it. Lindemann's work influenced Kübler-Ross, though hers became far more widely known. Her stages of grief allude to the element of "work" that Lindemann's title explicitly names. Grief, these doctors tell us and have been telling us, is a job. Grief demands our attention, our labor,

and a recognizable positive outcome. Indeed, Kübler-Ross's work has been so influential that it has become impossible to conceive of grief as anything except a lock-step process of productive work: John Bowlby's stages of grief, Therese Rando's processes of mourning, William Worden's tasks of mourning, and others.[4] The grief that we witness in *Gay Sex in the 70s*, I argue, creatively refuses the progressive nature of not only Freudian mourning but of the famous stages of grief delineated by Kübler-Ross and others. Against the expected narratives widely offered, then, the subjects of this documentary practice grieving not as a vocation but an avocation, not as a scientific inquiry but as a form of artistic expression, not as a process to be moved through but as a state in which to linger, not as a personal struggle with recognizable stages but as an ongoing opportunity for living out the fantasies of an imagined collective of the living and the dead.

III.

With Freud and Kübler-Ross as counterpoints, I suggest that Barton's nostalgic shuffling of his tiles, his "shards of civilization," and his refusal to tuck them neatly into a box in his attic or basement, evidence a way of grieving the past that does not ever fully move beyond itself, either into healthy mourning or through the proper stages toward acceptance. For Barton, these tiles are not objects to bring out only when a documentarian knocks on your door asking for an interview about the days before AIDS. Rather, when he explains in a later segment that he always keeps his former partner's tile "on top" of the others, it's clear that the tiles reside on the table permanently. In his small living space, he lives with and around his "shards of civilization" rather than packing them up and putting them away. The tactile experience of holding the tiles is important for him, as he lingers over some of the faces while he shows Lovett the various friends

he has lost. Alvin Baltrop, another interview subject, gives Lovett a tour of his home, which is also crammed with photographs and memorabilia from the past. A few are in the room where he sits for the interview, which he takes out and holds up to the camera, but he gestures to even more that are in a room of the apartment he does not often visit. Nevertheless, he confesses to Lovett, he "can't get rid of them."

The material objects in this documentary recall Scott Herring's recent work on hoarding as "less an inherent disease in the head and more a decades-spanning concatenation of medico-legal expertise and popular lore" (3). It would be an easy project to pathologize the men who collect these items in their tiny New York apartments, stuffed to bursting with the material evidence of a past that cannot be recreated. And, certainly, the effulgence of material objects in some of the apartments in this documentary do suggest a kind of generational disorder—i.e. there are more objects than can fit comfortably in the homes of those who are still living because so many are dead. Simply, there are more objects remaining to attest to the past than there are human beings to do so. I mention Herring's work here not to suggest that nostalgic grief necessarily implies an "unhealthy" affinity for material objects, but to draw a connection between Herring's hoarders pathologized in recent years by the psychiatric community and the non-productive, nostalgic grievers pathologized by Freud, Kübler-Ross, and others.

This nostalgic grief of the kind offered in *Gay Sex in the 70s* does not in all ways resemble grief as we tend to conceive of it. There is a sense of joy in it. Part of why nostalgic grief may be pathologized is because it allows—in fact, insists—a person maintain the past in memory, making frequent imaginative trips back. Again, Barton provides an example. In one of the final scenes of the documentary, immediately following clips of recent Pride parades set

against club music, we see Lovett interviewing Barton at his kitchen table. Barton begins, almost mid-thought, "Except I kinda miss some of that, the old time stuff. Some of the excitements, I mean. I look back at that now and it's all like, so, it's all history. I wonder if I had to do it all over again if I would. I mean, would I do the same things again?" He pauses, looks at the filmmaker, and smiles, predicting Lovett's answer: "You think I would!" Barton's initial comment that he "miss[es] some of that, the old time stuff," accrues nostalgic content especially in its placement immediately following several seconds of stock clips of contemporary Pride celebrations. Here and throughout, Barton is able to entertain two emotional positions at once—grief around the tragedy of AIDS and how it decimated gay life and, at the same time, a longing for the kinds of social structures and experiences enabled by the gay past. These two emotional positions coalesce even more strikingly in the subsequent short scene in which Barton takes Lovett to the piers where plentiful and mostly consequence-free sex between men occurred in the 1970s—precisely the sexual cultures that Lovett's film records. What the viewer notices first is how gentrified the area now looks—fresh concrete, new metal railings separating the walkways from the water below, straight couples walking hand in hand, joggers listening to music on headphones. Standing in front of the camera, Barton points out a cluster of probably fifty wooden poles sticking out of the water not far beyond where the current railing ends, commenting "And that's what's left from the piers. It's like, all of them used to go out that far," he explains, gesturing a long way into the distance. He pauses, becoming more serious, and concludes, "It was really great." He turns and walks away. The camera offers more shots of various folks, eventually settling on one shot of a tidy, professional-looking sign that reads, "Park Closes at 1AM."

Alvin, too, proves himself capable of nostalgic reflection, occupying at once the emotional positions of longing and of joy as he describes the past. In Alvin's cluttered apartment, he pulls out various photographs to show Lovett. As Alvin absent-mindedly shuffles through the photos, Lovett explains from behind the camera, "So, Alvin, the period that we're going to talk about is June '69, Stonewall, to June '81, beginning of AIDS." Alvin nods, listening, and then finally looks up to face the camera. Lovett finishes, "You know some people have talked about it as the most libertine period that the western world has ever seen since Rome, basically." A sly smile passes over Alvin's face that turns into a wide grin. A disco hit from 1976, Boney M's "Baby Do You Want to Bump?," plays in the background, gradually becoming louder. Alvin responds, smiling, "It was." In one single short scene, as he sits among pictures of his deceased friends and lovers and the memorabilia of many others, Alvin nevertheless recalls the 1970s joyously. Later, he clarifies how he and others felt during those years, highlighting how the freedom and pleasure took place alongside danger and struggles: "You did not care about the broken-down, the danger, the dirty, the smell, the raunchiness. You cared about meeting someone and having sex. It was cruise, meet, have sex in one of the spots inside the piers. Most of it was free, baby. Free love, free sex. Get it, bust a nut, and keep going."

As Alvin's recollection indicates, another marker of nostalgic grief is that it does not undertake to erase those aspects of the past that were not inarguably positive. Rather, nostalgic grief places those unpleasant memories alongside positive experiences, creating recollections that are less idealistic than they might otherwise be. To put it simply, *Gay Sex in the 70s* does not try to argue that the 1970s were a universally positive time for gay men. Subjects recount a number of unquestionably negative stories of life in those years, such as homophobic doctors

who ridiculed gay patients when they were diagnosed with sexually transmitted diseases, the filthiness of the untidy parks where men had sex because there were few other safe places to do so, and the accidental deaths of men on the piers because they climbed into an area of a building or onto a beam or railing that gave way, dropping them into the water below, where they drowned. (Barton, in particular, recalls seeing dead bodies floating in the water around the piers, and Lovett acknowledges that he has witnessed the same.) Lee Edelman might suggest that these stories proclaim the co-implication of gay male sex and the *jouissance* of the death drive. No doubt that is one way we might make meaning, but I think there is something more (or, at least, something else) going on. Painstakingly, the documentary recounts both what was good about the past and what was not so good. Still, most of the men interviewed imply their preference for the types of sociality enabled by the historical moment of the 1970s. Even as they recall sexual encounters in dirty parks and drowning deaths on the piers, they likewise recall how friendships developed, not in spite of, but directly out of sexual encounters, how the as-yet un-institutionalized gay culture enabled a degree of racial diversity and intermixing in bars and at parties that we no longer commonly see, and how, despite homophobic medical professionals, there was nonetheless little risk to engaging in sex more or less indiscriminately, innocently, and exuberantly.

The argument I have been making around the nostalgia of *Gay Sex in the 70s* departs drastically from the only other critical treatment of the film, published a year after the film's release. The historian Jim Downs argues that Lovett's documentary, in its nostalgia for a pre-AIDS moment, perpetuates an irresponsible historical narrative in which the tragedy of AIDS is a direct consequence of the "unbridled sex among gay men" that the 1970s witnessed, which

ultimately "impos[es] a moral narrative upon what is a historical process" (38). Downs reads (or mis-reads) the film's "moral" intention as twofold: first, to attribute the spread of AIDS to the supposedly irresponsible behavior of gay men in the decade preceding AIDS and, second, to erase from history any record of gay political activism occurring during these years of sexual freedom. Both of these intentions are underwritten, in Downs's opinion, by the implication that "promiscuous sex is fundamental to gay identity" (39).[5] Downs's critique of *Gay Sex in the 70s* is founded on his claim that the film only "slowly begins to hint at the demise of this brief sexual paradise" once the film is well underway. What Downs misses—and what I have been arguing is essential to understanding this film as a document that records nostalgia as a way of grieving the queer past—is that the film is *never not* framed by AIDS. In other words, this is not a story about how the behaviors of a debaucherous culture paved the way for a ruined and genocidal future. The film opens, as I have pointed out, on Barton's quiet reflection over the picture tiles of friends and lovers who died. And the film's title itself is a tacit acknowledgment of how AIDS structured gay history in the last part of the twentieth century. The central problem with Downs's reading is that he fails to see how nostalgia for the sexual freedom of the 1970s might be an enactment of nonproductive queer grief—a refusal to create a story with a lesson—rather than a morality tale of cause and effect.

Insofar as Downs's reaction suggests that the film may make some historians uncomfortable, it is not because the film makes a moral argument about AIDS as a natural consequence of gay sexual freedom nor because the film implies that gay men living in the 1970s were primarily sexual rather than political in their interests and engagements (as if sex and politics are always necessarily unconnected from one another). Rather, what makes *Gay Sex in*

the 70s difficult to bring into line with our current theoretical and historical tools is that it contests queer models for understanding the past. In fact, it undermines what queer theorists Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed have termed "degenerational unremembering," which names the way that queer theory arose in the 1990s alongside the erasure of AIDS from queer memory. Rather than the acknowledgement of loss through grief, degenerational unremembering "prescribe[s] amnesia as a prophylaxis against loss" (39). The past is ultimately rendered nothing more than fodder for the political projects of the present. This film, in contradistinction to the trend Castiglia and Reed name, asks us to reckon with our grief for a lost past that we can no longer access, not so that the present improves, but simply for its own sake.

Castiglia and Reed describe how, beginning with the flâneur, queerness has often been conceived as a rejection of, specifically, "time-work discipline" and, more generally, temporal progress (18). In one register, then, queerness becomes a way of living out "temporal dislocation" (19). Reading *Gay Sex in the 70s* as a document of grief highlights how nostalgia can function as a rejection of disciplined, productive grief—a "temporal dislocation" of grief, in other words. In place of the disciplined, productive grief of Freud, Kübler-Ross, and others, the subjects of this film grieve by living with and around the losses they have suffered. As Castiglia and Reed put it, "To look back is, after all, to refuse the imperatives laid down at the destruction of Sodom" (60). This film shows us how to refuse those imperatives. Barton's picture tiles serve symbolically here: Whether inconvenient, kitschy, unhealthy, or abnormal, there is no putting-away of the grief that this documentary allows its viewer to witness and learn from.

IV.

> "Some walk by my side and some behind, and some embrace my arms or neck,

> They the spirits of dear friends dead or alive, thicker they come, a
> great crowd, and I in the middle."
> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

One of the stories this dissertation tells, however obliquely, is the story of my grief. In mid-September of my third year of graduate school, only a few months before I would begin writing sections of what would eventually become this dissertation, my sister died. Her death was neither sudden—she had been sick for a year, mysteriously unable to keep food down and then, eventually, unable to eat much at all—nor was it expected. The day before she died, I sat with her in the hospital and listened while a doctor explained to us that this condition, whatever it was, was not fatal. He assured us that Amy would not, like my mother had a little over a decade before, die in a hospital after a long and strange illness. No, he said, things would get better.

The thought that returned to me over and over in the months after her death, after her friends and I organized a funeral with production value that would rival any off-Broadway show, while I taught freshman composition and tried to read for my fields exams, was this: Death has a way of forcing us into a queer relationship to time. The notion that things get better feels impossible to conceptualize, much less to internalize. Progress, hope, forward movement of any kind: They become a foreign language, foreign concepts. So, when I say that death forced me into a queer relationship to time, I mean both that time stopped—an impossibility, but a feeling—and that I wished for time to move backward—another impossibility, and a desire.

The feeling that time stops when a loved one dies is so commonplace by now as to be trite. Though I felt it as a human being, as a scholar I dismissed it as uninteresting and typical. But the desire to go backward in time, to recede into the past rather than charge into the future, to live in reverse—I recognized that as the queer relationship to time that it is. And since queers

have been teaching me how to keep living since I was barely a teenager, I returned to queer theoretical texts that had informed my thinking throughout graduate school—Heather Love's *Feeling Backward* and Eve Sedgwick's "Paranoid and Reparative Reading," among others—and I discovered new ones like Jose Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* and Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Binds*. I found companionship among those who keep looking back, more and more sure that the best is most decidedly *not* yet to come. But finding comfort is different than progress, and I still reject the latter, even now.

While I cannot say that I have been nostalgic every day I have worked on this dissertation (though I have been a number of other things—frustrated, exhilarated, overwhelmed, etc.), I can say that this dissertation was written out of my realization that, though impossible, the desire to go back to some moment in the past is not a bad desire. And, if it is immature or unhealthy, then I suppose, that makes it only so much the queerer.

[1] Marcos Natali, a theorist of nostalgia, summarizes how Freud's delineation of mourning and melancholia does not completely privilege mourning: "For Freud the melancholic person is not delusional or mistaken […] Those who are melancholic, then, are actually quite lucid, recognizing the 'reality' of death and avoiding […] the diversions devised in order to avoid thinking about death […] The melancholic do think about such things—constantly, obsessively—yet they conclude that death and loss are indeed irreparable and are therefore understandably overcome by grief" (23).

[2] In the introduction, I wrote about queer nostalgia as a form of resistance to mainstream gay narratives of progress. Queer nostalgia as a mode of mourning, too, resists progress, though progress is on individual terms here, rather than social.

[3] It is only fair to note that Kübler-Ross's theory of grief is not built wholly on progressivist notions of differences between the past and the present. This is another way of saying that Kübler-Ross is herself occasionally nostalgic. Early in *On Death and Dying*, she describes how much more ably people dealt with the emotions attending grief in the past because death was not something secreted away or spoken about in hushed tones, even to children. Developments in science, she writes, have in fact brought about a situation in which "we seem to fear and deny the reality of death" much more so than those living in pre-modern eras (7).

[4] See Worden, Rando, and Bowlby.

[5] Whether or not promiscuous sex is fundamental to gay identity, the film offers another narrative that Downs fails to mention. Rodger McFarlane, one of the film subjects, explains that the years between Stonewall and AIDS were actually essential not to the tragedy of AIDS but to the heroism of gay community's response: "It may have seemed trivial, but it's where we learned to love ourselves, to love each other, and it's what made possible our heroic reaction when the war came," he declares.

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