

# **Queer Worldmaking**

Radical Sexual Politics in the Age of United States Hegemony

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Supported by the Leverhulme Trust

2022

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## Abstract

Queer struggles have radically contested the global social relations of the post-war American order. These struggles include most prominently the gay liberation movement of the sixties, the black lesbian feminist movement of the seventies, and the AIDS activist movement of the eighties. They responded to the successive regimes of accumulation that determined the organization and expansion of the American world system, forming extensive organizational structures, solidarity networks, and critical knowledges that traveled across the boundaries of nation, state, and territory. They were not intended primarily, or often even at all, as parodic citations of dominant gender norms within the public sphere, but rather as antagonistic practices that could transform and transcend the social relations of United States hegemony. This thesis is therefore about queer worldmaking in its most literal sense. It finds a connection between *queer* political formations and the American *world* system.

The transnational connections, encounters, and ideological orientations of these queer social movements have been omitted within their nation-based narrative histories. This study asks the question: What appears when a reading of radical queer movements is pursued that resists an investment in nationally bounded chronologies? A transnational history of radical sexual politics is mobilized in the service of an alternative theory of queerness, revolutionary politics, and pleasure. It illuminates how queer social movements have deployed pleasure to validate their cause of revolutionary transformation on a transnational scale. Projects of queer worldmaking articulate queerness not only as a product of subordination and repression, but also as the site of pleasure, enjoyment, and sociality. What unites these social movements, it is argued, is their conviction that the pursuit of Eros could create openings for the supersession of the existing global order and the instantiation of egalitarian systems through which we can collectively and cooperatively determine our gender and sexual lives.

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# Acknowledgments

This thesis owes itself to the communities that I have been so lucky to find myself in over the past few years. I am immeasurably grateful to my supervisors at Queen Mary University for their trust and support, as well as to present and past mentors at the London School of Economics and the University of Oxford. My PhD peers at Queen Mary and beyond have inspired and taught me more than any lecture ever could, and I have been deeply moved by the encouragement and comradery from faculty members at the School of Politics and International Relations throughout what was a tumultuous three-year period. To my reading group friends without whom I simply cannot imagine the intellectual trajectory of the past years of my life, I love you guys. I have benefited immensely from my teachers at the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research, from the participants of the Rabbles podcast, and from my colleagues at TheoryLab, Doing International Political Sociology, the New School for Social Research Theory Collective, Gregynog Ideas Lab, and the Leverhulme Trust Mobile People Programme. I am especially indebted to the scholars who acted as discussants for my work at a number of the aforementioned seminars. My students have been a constant source of joy and creativity for which I am very grateful. Finally, I am fortunate to experience the uplifting love, generosity, and care of my boyfriend, friends and comrades, and many family members.

## Introduction. Queer worldmaking

The abstract equality of ‘we the people’ inscribed in the Preamble to the United States Constitution might imply a democratic distribution of sexual identities, erotic practices, and familial arrangements within civil society. This stipulation of abstract equality obfuscates a concrete historical reality: the hierarchization of those sexual formations. In the nineteenth century, the constitution of a bourgeois private sphere became intimately tied to the projects of conquest, dispossession, and exploitation upon which the US nation-state was built. Complexes of non-normative sexual identities, practices, and arrangements were stigmatized and subordinated in order to secure the illusory universality of this sphere of ‘proper’ domestic relations — that is, of normative sexuality and gender, the couple form, legitimate procreation, private property, inheritance, and whiteness (see Davis, 1972; Wexler, 2000; Stoler, 2006; Pascoe, 2009; Rifkin, 2011; Shah, 2012; Mies, 2014). Enslaved, immigrant, indigenous, and waged proletarians, along with urban subcultures of gender deviants, prostitutes, and homosexuals, developed variegated forms of kinship and family forms that were deemed threatening to the stability of bourgeois domestic relations. Enslaved people in the American South were brutally subjected to natal alienation, migrant access to citizenship, tenancy, and work was curtailed or denied on the basis of migrant societies’ non-normative domestic arrangements, and settler colonial territorial expansion entailed the eradication of indigenous forms of gender, sexual, and familial diversity. In short, proximity to bourgeois domesticity dictated the distribution and organization of property, citizenship, labor, and status.

Non-normative proletarian sexual formations were ascribed a deviant biological or cultural status, guaranteeing that the normative bourgeois domestic sphere would appear as the eternal and natural expression of how life within civil society has always been organized. Over the course of the twentieth century, bourgeois patterns of sexual, gender, and family life were gradually extended to subordinated groups (see Lasch, 1977; Cott, 2000; Franke, 2015; Weeks, 2021; Lewis, 2022). On the one hand, this process of family normalization offered large swaths of the US population vital legal and economic protections and provided a nominal refuge from the violence and upheavals of the state and

capital. On the other hand, family normalization imposed a regulatory model of domesticity that was central to the management of working-class populations and the reproduction of gendered, racial, and sexual hierarchies. Writing about the transition from a slave economy to a free labor system in the American South, Saidiya Hartman (1997: 157) argues that ‘issues of family and domesticity emerge obliquely and in relation to issues of labor, hygiene, and discipline.’ She continues: ‘[D]omesticity was the sign of civilization, settlement, and rational desire, as contrasted with the itinerancy and subsistence of those eluding the contract system.’ Rather than an indication of progress, the enforcement of bourgeois domesticity created new routes for the incursions of the US state and capital.

After the Second World War, as the United States emerged as a dominant power within the international system, the subordination of non-normative sexual formations within American civil society became central to the maintenance of the global system of relations that secured its hegemonic status (see Ferguson, 2004; Hong, 2006; Floyd, 2009; Chitty, 2020). During this period, in the United States and other advanced capitalist economies, queerness has conventionally named non-normative sexual formations that are antithetical to the virtues of productivity, frugality, docility, rational desire, and restraint (see Cooper, 2017; O’Brien, 2020).<sup>1</sup> In the postcolonial nation-states of the global South, elites frame queerness as a symptom of Western consumerism and decadence that is imposed upon and undermines ‘traditional’ or ‘indigenous’ national cultures (see Hoad, 2007; Rao, 2020). Such discourses place the putative origins of queerness outside the borders of their body politic in an attempt to shore up national sovereignty, control borders, and repress non-normative sexual formations at home. Anti-imperialist, socialist, and communist revolutionary movements across this divide have frequently colluded with such representations of queerness in innovative ways.

The contradiction between the abstract equality codified in the United States Constitution and subsequently internationalized in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, on the one hand, and the concrete hierarchization of sexual identities, practices, and arrangements, on the other,

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<sup>1</sup> Queerness, as the term is deployed here, designates a social relation rather than a demographic. The social groups to whom the label ‘queer’ is attached are therefore not synonymous with what is today known as the LGBTI community. Indeed, numerous members of the LGBTI community have achieved access to bourgeois institutions of domesticity and property by distinguishing themselves from proletarian, often racialized, queer formations (Duggan, 2003; Puar, 2017).



provided the condition for the formation of revolutionary queer movements. The illusory universality of the post-war American hegemonic order was predicated in part on the subordination of queer formations that exceeded the normative standards of ‘civilized’ conduct and embodiment deemed necessary to its reproduction. Queerness therefore became a site of immanent possibility for the supersession of that hegemonic order. It offered a vantage point from which to reconsider the historical development of, and contestations over, United States hegemony.

Queer struggles emerged to radically contest the global social relations that stabilized American hegemony by heightening the contradictions between the abstract equality and concrete differentiation of sexual formations. These movements include amongst their most prominent cases the gay liberation movement of the sixties, the black lesbian feminist movement of the seventies, and the AIDS activist movement of the eighties. This study situates these movements within the historical evolution of United States hegemony, revealing them to be struggles that operated through transnational networks and elaborated distinct political ideologies that found within queer formations possibilities for social transformation. It seeks to make legible the transnational connections, encounters, and ideological orientations that have been omitted within the nation-based narrative histories of these queer social movements. It asks what processes account for the forgetting or denial of such transnational entanglements, and how the proposed alternative reading practices defy the naturalization of this forgetting. In other words, it attends to the question: What appears when a historical reading of radical queer movements is pursued that resists an investment in nationally bounded chronologies and archives?

This transnational history of radical sexual politics is mobilized in the service of an alternative theory of queerness, revolutionary politics, and pleasure. It illuminates how queer social movements have deployed pleasure to validate their cause of revolutionary transformation on a transnational scale. Queer radicals, it shows, have built their struggles on the basis of specific erotic and bodily pleasures that can, in the words of Fredric Jameson (2008: 385), ‘stand in as a figure of the transformation of social relations as a whole.’ My intention is not to idealize pleasure as an organic or spontaneous force with inherently revolutionary capacities. Rather it is to show how pleasure has been invoked, in

numerous complex and often contradictory ways, as a site of political hope in the transnational fight for sexual freedom. I refer to this history of struggle as the project of *queer worldmaking*.

## On worldmaking

The term ‘worldmaking’ is attributed to Nelson Goodman (1978). In his book *Ways of Worldmaking*, he describes worldmaking as a process of remaking existing worlds by reorganizing their ‘motley entities’ (ibid.: 8). This reorganization involves the fragmentation, reassembly, and weighing of the elements that compose worlds, the removal or addition of more such elements, and the overall reshaping of the patterns they create. Goodman’s notion of a ‘world’ has resonances with other familiar terms (such as episteme, imaginary, regime of truth, or cosmology) that seek to capture how human beings imagine, represent, and construct the social environments that they inhabit. That is, a world refers to a symbolic system that is fabricated through various ‘cognitive operations of classification’ (Bell, 2013: 258). Worldmaking therefore refers primarily to an *epistemological* practice, a mode of representation through which we apprehend and delimit the social environment within which we are embedded. This practice also raises *ontological* concerns about what objects populate those worlds. Amia Srinivasan (2019: 145) refers to this dual function when she writes that worldmaking not only shapes what identities, practices, and institutions appear legitimate, but also what appears in the first place.

The ability to make things appear real and legitimate is, of course, not equally available to everyone, and not all worldmaking projects are successful at reconstituting a dominant symbolic order. This raises a number of political questions that are elided within Goodman’s analysis (Bell, 2013: 260). What worlds can be made? Which ones are desirable? Whose interests do they reproduce? And how do we distinguish between the everyday practices that stabilize a world and those which build new ones? It should be noted that the making of a world can occur on different scales. However, the scale of a world cannot be determined prior to the practice of worldmaking itself. To do so would be to fix the parameters of the worldmaking project in advance, constraining one’s frame to a particular unit of

organization (be it the community, the state, the region, or the planet) before investigating the scale of the project itself (Bell, 2013: 254-55).

This poses three questions, among others, for the study of worldmaking: First, what elements compose the world that is being made anew? Second, what political ideology orients its practices and shapes its horizon? And, third, what is the spatial scale of the world it seeks to build? Although Goodman provides only sparse guidance on these questions, we can look to more recent studies such as Adom Getachew's monograph on anti-colonial nationalism, *Worldmaking After Empire*, instead. Getachew (2019) recasts decolonization as a worldmaking project. She demonstrates that worldmaking involved not only a new representational order — a vision of a post-imperial, domination-free, and egalitarian world — although it was certainly that. Crucially, 'the achievement of this ideal required juridical, political, and economic institutions in the international realm that would secure non-domination' (ibid.: 2). Depending on the historical context, the vision of a new world was accompanied either by a repurposed United Nations, the formation of regional federations in the West Indies and Africa, or a New International Economic Order. The world that the twentieth-century anti-colonial nationalists sought to build comprised both symbolic systems and their material manifestations. Each project was animated by distinct political principles, be it Nnamdi Azikiwe's anti-colonial reinvention of self-determination, the federalism of Eric Williams and Kwame Nkrumah, or Julius Nyerere's expansive account of sovereign equality. Finally, each iteration of anti-colonial worldmaking implied a different spatial scale for the organization of a post-imperial order.

Adom Getachew's account of worldmaking is centered around traditional forms of political struggle. She studies the anti-colonial worlds envisioned and constructed by elite men engaged in formal projects of movement-building and statecraft. Her focus on these select leaders foreclosed a consideration of more marginal social formations that participated in the construction of the postcolonial world. When queer theorists borrowed the term worldmaking in the late nineties, it was in part to shed light on the practices that are too often omitted in discussions of traditional social movements. In *Disidentifications*, José E. Muñoz (1999) describes the creative ways that queer people have contested the dominant logics of the public sphere through theatrical enactments of selfhood that

defy the prescriptions of heteronormativity and whiteness. These public performances of ‘emergent identity-in-difference’ envision new social relations that become the foundation of a ‘counterpublic sphere’ (ibid.: 7). He describes the formation of such counterpublics, built from the raw material of the dominant public sphere, as queer worldmaking. Paraphrasing Goodman, Muñoz (ibid.: 196) writes that queer counterpublics are collective worlds ‘where a stigmatized identity is simultaneously decomposed and recomposed; where values and tastes are reordered and reweighed utilizing alternate criteria; where a degree of editing, deletion, and supplementation is applied to an oppressive social script; and where a fundamental deformation of the dominant public sphere is achieved.’ It is through iterative public performances of queerness that oppositional worlds are formed. Queer worldmaking is also described as linked to the formation of counterpublics in Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s essay ‘Sex in Public.’ They define a counterpublic as ‘an indefinitely accessible world conscious of its subordinate relation’ (Berlant and Warner, 1998: 558). Queer counterpublics are sustained by practical knowledges that are developed ‘in mobile sites of drag, youth culture, music, dance, parades, flaunting, and cruising-sites’ (ibid.: 561). Contrary to more visible forms of traditional social movements, the transience of these queer counterpublics makes it difficult to recognize them *as* worldmaking. In short, for both Muñoz and Berlant and Warner, queer worldmaking refers to a set of oppositional social practices that subvert the heteronormative logics of the dominant public sphere and enact alternative counterpublics.

The attempt to privilege practices that are omitted from the traditional view of social movements has had the regrettable effect of removing social movements from the purview of queer worldmaking altogether. The elision of social movements from the available accounts of queer worldmaking stems from three main limitations. First, accounts of queer worldmaking present a overly restricted, dematerialized view of the elements that constitute queer worlds. For Muñoz (1999: 196), queer worldmaking establishes ‘oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of “truth” that subjugate minoritarian people.’ The performances it includes, from poetry and art to anonymous sex, are rendered intelligible almost exclusively as forms of critical knowledge production. Berlant and Warner (1998: 548) describe in more expansive terms the heteronormative public sphere

which queer worldmaking seeks to reconstitute, characterizing it as a combination of both ‘norms’ and ‘material practices that [...] are implicated in the hierarchies of property and propriety.’ The latter encompasses, for Berlant and Warner, the law, commerce, state policies such as welfare rollbacks and zoning ordinances, and the institutions of the domestic sphere. However, they deduct these material arrangements from their account of queer worldmaking when they write that queer counterpublics have ‘almost no institutional matrix’ (ibid.: 562).

Can Act Up appear in this account of queer worldmaking — an activist group that spawned branches in almost 150 cities worldwide, experimenting with various non-hierarchical organizational forms and decentralized leadership structures? The black lesbian feminist movement was anchored in groups such as the Third World Women’s Alliance and the Combahee River Collective, many of whose members emerged from institutions like the *Freedom* and *Freedomways* journals, the Harlem Writers Guild, and the Committee for the Negro in the Arts which sustained Harlem as a cosmopolitan political milieu. And gay liberationism too formed extensive institutional networks, with the Gay Liberation Front, Third World Gay Revolution, Radicalesbians, Red Butterfly, and STAR opening chapters in dozens of US cities and countless more around the globe. The centrality of transnational movements has thusfar been mostly omitted from available accounts of queer worldmaking. For Berlant and Warner, like for Muñoz, queer worldmaking builds alternative knowledges, not institutions. Indeed it presupposes the continued existence of heteronormative infrastructures as a condition of possibility, ‘conscious of its subordinate relation’ rather than vying for dominance.

Second, these accounts evade the political questions of strategy, organization, and endurance. Although they illustrate how central the life-affirming initiatives that sustain queer collectives have been to the survival of so many who live under the constant and pervasive threat of violence, they tend to conflate the fight to secure conditions of survival with the political horizon of queer worldmaking itself. Muñoz (1999: 189) does acknowledge that ‘[n]ot all performances are liberatory or transformative.’ However, the reader is left wondering how to determine which performative interventions are likely to be more efficacious than others, and how they might be coordinated or planned (Lloyd, 1999). In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz (2019) reformulates queer worldmaking as a

prefigurative practice that finds ‘anticipatory illuminations of the utopian’ within decentralized, quotidian moments of performative disruption. Queer worldmaking, on this account, offers an ethos more than a politics. ‘Utopian visions are not yet themselves a politics,’ Fredric Jameson (1991: 159) tells us.

Significantly, for Muñoz, the treatment of cultural and aesthetic performances as representational practices interpellates the subject as a spectator, rather than political actor, granting primacy to the denaturalization of governing regimes of truth over planning and organizing. Muñoz (1999: 196): ‘Such performances *transport* the performer *and* the spectator to a vantage point where transformation and politics are imaginable.’ While expanding the limits of political imagination is of course integral to any political struggle, this performative process becomes disconnected from the task of realizing itself when it is left to the individual spectator (for whom it may signify in unexpected ways) rather than to a collective subject. As Moya Lloyd (1999: 210) explains, the political productiveness of a performative disruption is determined by ‘the space within which [it] occurs, the others involved in or implicated by the production, and how they receive and interpret what they see.’ Activist groups like Act Up were known for their theatrical activist tactics, like die-ins and other disruptive public performances and artistic productions, yet such actions were not separate from the partisan business of addressing questions of endurance, planning, prioritization, and organization.

Finally, there is the question of scale. What are the edges of the world being made anew? Within queer and feminist scholarship since the nineties, there has been a mandate to scale down to local, metropolitan meanings and practices of gender and sexuality (Kahan, 2017). Kathi Weeks (2021: 2) characterizes this dominant mode of academic knowledge production as placing a premium ‘on local, small-scale, biographically centred and finely textured studies of the meaningfulness of subjective and intersubjective experience.’ The eschewal of ‘large-scale structures, systematicities and social totalities’ that this mandate entails, Weeks (ibid.) argues, turns the focus ‘from regularities to singularities, from commonalities to difference, from business as usual to states of exception.’ This drive towards specification and localization is evident in accounts of queer counterpublics, which are envisioned as highly confined, subterranean, and fugitive sites, such as bathhouses, ballrooms, and

dance venues. Counterpublics nevertheless perpetually transgress their own frontiers. Berlant and Warner write:

[A] 'world,' like 'public,' differs from community or group because it necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright. The queer world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies.

(Berlant and Warner, 1998: 558)

This passage clarifies that queer worldmaking, according to Berlant and Warner, is not reducible to a particular identity group or demographic and that its boundaries are dynamic.

Nevertheless, those boundaries cannot be infinitely mobile, as they are constituted in relation to the historical and social conditions from within which the worldmaking project proceeds. This raises the following question: What scale is appropriate to a consideration of queer worldmaking? The aforementioned accounts root queer worldmaking in an attempt to transform the prevailing institutions of heteronormativity. Yet they do not specify at what level heteronormativity, and in turn the worldmaking projects that contest it, are constituted. The result is a tendency to oscillate between particular locales and the universal. As Kevin Floyd (2009: 224) argues, queer accounts of worldmaking slip into a register that 'read[s] these queer worlds in terms of sexual practices that abide in some kind of absolute, dehistoricized opposition to identity or subjectivity.' Indeed, Muñoz (1999) describes queer worldmaking both as practices within localized semi-public contexts and as a universal figure for the failure of unitary identification as such. Situating queer worldmaking within the social relations from which it emerges instead, clarifies the level of analysis appropriate to understanding its constitution and ultimate horizon. In the following section, I argue that queer worldmaking practices refer to a transformation of gender and sexual life under the global social relations of United States

hegemony. Queer worldmaking therefore far surpasses the boundaries of the urban counterpublic yet must still be contextualized within the historical stages of US hegemony.

### On hegemony

World financial, military, and political power was concentrated in the hands of the United States after the Second World War. This unparalleled centralization of power allowed the US to establish the perception that its national interests ‘embodied a universal interest’ (Arrighi, 2010: 66). A new hegemonic order emerged, centered on the United States, whose main contours Giovanni Arrighi has described in *The Long Twentieth Century* as follows:

[A]t Bretton Woods the foundations of a new world monetary system had been established; at Hiroshima and Nagasaki new means of violence had demonstrated what the military underpinnings of the new world order would be; and at San Francisco new norms and rules for the legitimization of state-making and war-making had been laid out in the UN Charter.

(Arrighi, 2010: 283)

In the eighties, Arrighi and a group of International Relations (IR) and International Political Economy (IPE) scholars, including Robert W. Cox, Stephen Gill, Mark Rupert, and John Agnew, sought to illuminate the emergence, development, and breakdown of American post-war global dominance. They creatively elaborated Antonio Gramsci’s notion of ‘hegemony,’ extending it beyond the national context to the level of the international state system.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the conceptions of hegemony found within realist and liberal institutionalist IR perspectives, which conceive of world orders in terms of inter-state relations or the coordinating functions of multilateral institutions respectively, the

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<sup>2</sup> This scholarship emerged at a moment of perceived hegemonic decline, after the virtual acknowledgement of defeat by the United States in Vietnam and the fiscal crisis of the mid-seventies. That United States hegemony became present to IR scholars only as a perceived loss is indicative both of its unquestioned character and of the discipline’s investment in its reproduction (Cólas, 2016: 209).



Marxist-inspired approach distinguished itself through its Gramscian background (Cólas, 2016: 204-05).

For Gramsci, hegemony described the dominance of a particular class, mediated by the market, the state, and civil society. Hegemony provided the basis for the harmonization of different classes through a dialectic of both coercion and consent and therefore required ‘a historical congruence between material forces, institutions and ideologies’ (Gill and Law, 1993: 94). The seductiveness of Gramsci’s theory of class rule for these IR and IPE scholars was its holism and non-reductionism (Cox, 1981: 134). Hegemony is not limited to financial power or political control. As Raymond Williams (2015: 100) explains, hegemony includes ‘a particular way of seeing the world and human nature and relationships’ that is not just intellectual but instead ‘expressed over a range from institutions to relationships and consciousness.’ Applied to the level of the international system, Robert W. Cox (1981: 139) writes that hegemony names ‘a coherent conjunction or fit between a configuration of material power, the prevalent collective image of a world order (including certain norms) and a set of institutions which administer the order with a certain semblance of universality.’ The United States, according to Cox, established a hegemonic world order through the provision of ideational, material, and institutional forces that could cohere the prevailing global class structure.

Within Gramscian perspectives, civil society plays a key role in the reproduction of the hegemonic order since it is within this realm (comprising education, religion, media, art, and trade unionism) that common sense is constructed or challenged (Rupert, 1995: 27-28). The illusory universality of a hegemonic order cannot establish itself at the level of inter-state relations alone. It must entrench itself among the relations of civil society, which transgress national boundaries. Cox (1993: 61) states: ‘The hegemonic concept of world order is founded not only upon the regulation of inter-state conflict but also upon a globally-conceived civil society, i.e., a mode of production of global extent which brings about links among social classes of the countries encompassed by it.’ The institutions and mechanisms of civil society encompass seemingly ‘private’ domestic matters such as sexual behavior and familial arrangements. Gramsci (1934: 289-90) himself reflected on the inseparability of issues of private morality from the organization of production in his essay on the

rationalization of the Taylorist labor process in the United States during the interwar period. He explained the efforts of industrialists to inquire into ‘workers’ private lives’ and ‘control [their] “morality”’ as ‘necessities of the new methods of work’ (ibid.).

This inter-societal level of analysis creates ample opportunities for the study of sexual formations in relation to social forces of production, forms of state, and world orders. Such was the ambition of Christopher Chitty’s doctoral research, which was posthumously published after his early death under the title *Sexual Hegemony*. Chitty (2020) builds on the work of Antonio Gramsci to elucidate how the reproduction of bourgeois hegemony during the rise of global capitalism was predicated upon the management of potentially mutinous non-normative sexual formations. He follows the periodization of Giovanni Arrighi, tracking the innovative systems for policing homosexuality in hegemonic centers from fifteenth-century Florence to post-war America. Chitty (ibid.: 25) argues that the establishment of bourgeois sexual hegemony, ‘which facilitated both middle-class and working-class men’s adjustment to developments in modes of production by confining sexuality within private spaces and forms of intimacy revolving around the family,’ was central to the maintenance of capitalist class relations over this 700-year period. Sexual hegemony, according to Chitty, is achieved when ‘sexual norms benefiting a dominant social group shape the sexual conduct and self-understandings of other groups.’ When it fails, often under periods of world-systemic crisis, non-normative sexual formations threaten to become politicized and congeal ‘into opposition, defiance, or open antagonism toward socially dominant groups’ (ibid.).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In a close critique of the Gramscian IR tradition, Robbie Shilliam (2004: 82) argues that it implicitly universalizes capitalist social relations and therefore ‘evacuates the problematic of primitive accumulation from the constitution of hegemonic praxis.’ The international dimension of primitive accumulation is omitted from the inquiry of Gramscian IR scholars, he argues, since they presume that this process of social transformation has already been successfully completed at the level of the world order. Christopher Chitty in fact returns the problematic of primitive accumulation to Gramscian perspectives on the constitution of hegemonic world orders. For Chitty (2020: 27), queerness is categorically linked to property relations: ‘If property ownership incentivized stable family formations, then the development of capitalism had a tendency to generate a quasi-universal condition of propertylessness in which there was no basis for normal family life.’ It follows that the history of bourgeois sexual hegemony, the enclosure of sexuality within the private institutions of property and the family, is to be understood as a chapter within the history of primitive accumulation (ibid.: 34-35).

This study is concerned with radical queer struggles that arose during the American hegemonic order. David Harvey (2005b) has divided this period into two stages, the post-war Fordist and the post-seventies neoliberal regime of accumulation. These regimes of accumulation refer to the social structures, including the distinct organization of production and the state form, through which the United States organized and expanded its global hegemony. In the following chapters, I show how queer social movements emerged from the contradiction between the universalization of the nation-state form and capital's continual transgression of the boundaries set by the modern state-system, or what Arrighi (2010: 34) refers to as 'the recurrent contradiction between an "endless" accumulation of capital and a comparatively stable organization of political space.'

The post-war Fordist regime of accumulation required the growth of punitive state apparatuses in order to manage unruly surplus populations in cities and discipline non-normative familial arrangements that had historically been a source of labor power irregularities. This increased penetration of state power into social life was the context at which the gay liberation movement of the late sixties was directed. Amid the fiscal crisis of the following decade, the contradiction between the limitlessness of capital accumulation and the national state form was heightened as the conditions for sustained accumulation on a world scale were suspended. This contradiction was displaced onto black women within US civil society. Exploiting the turbulence caused by the unfolding military, financial, and legitimacy crises of the American hegemonic order, the black lesbian feminist movement of the seventies politicized their multiply determined subjugation within the imperial core. In the eighties and nineties, the United States was able to stabilize, and indeed expand, its hegemonic status through the neoliberal restructuring of the world system. The AIDS activist movement must be understood as a product of the restoration and renewal of the social order, instantiated through neoliberal logics of privatization that effectively criminalized queer formations within cities.

In other words, the *worlds* that these radical queer movements sought to remake were constituted by the successive stages of the American hegemonic order. Returning to the accounts of anti-heteronormative worldmaking found within the writings of Berlant, Warner, and Muñoz, we can say that the heteronormative logics that condition queer worldmaking practices must be understood

within the context of particular regimes of accumulation underwritten by the power of the US state. Kevin Floyd (2009: 199) argues as much when he writes that worldmaking ‘refers to the production of historically and socially situated, bounded totalities of queer praxis inherently critical of the ultimately global horizon of neoliberalized capital itself.’ To situate the nineties queer counterpublics described by Berlant, Warner, and Muñoz would be to understand them as oppositional to neoliberal forms of social regulation and privatization. And to an extent, their analyses of worldmaking do implicitly presuppose such an analysis of neoliberal capital. Certainly Berlant and Warner capture the restructurings associated with neoliberalism when they represent queer worldmaking as enacting counterpublics that were antithetical to the privatization of sex, the rezoning of urban spaces, and the erosion of social support. However, without specifying the scale of neoliberal social relations, they equally miss the scale of the queer worldmaking projects that sought to reconstitute them. This thesis therefore recasts queer worldmaking as the transnational project of overcoming the bourgeois sexual relations that were central to the reproduction of United States hegemony.

### On methodology

The architecture of US hegemony was more extensive than the international networks of former empires. The post-war order produced a great number of formal international institutions and political structures to organize and regulate the enlargement of capitalism. This infrastructure shaped the scale and scope of political projects for its transformation. The emergence of queer worldmaking must therefore be situated in relation to the transnational context which made that emergence possible. The responses to, and rejections of, American hegemony and its expansion coalesced around a complex transnational architecture; one of solidarity networks, coalition building, political organization, and friendship groups that were forged across the boundaries of presumed entities like nation, state, or territory. The transnational character of social movements during this period, however, is often effaced or treated as epiphenomenal.

Queer worldmaking practices refused to be contained within the borders of a single nation, state, or society. This thesis begins with the assumption that there is value in attending to the transnational relations, activities, and orientations of radical queer movements in the study of their emergence, transformation, and dissolution (cf. Go and Lawson, 2017). US-centric, domestic frames have predisposed scholars away from these transnational processes. At worst, this oversight perpetuates US exceptionalist discourses and a historical amnesia about the global forms of violence and exploitation it has enacted. This study's eschewal of methodological nationalism unlocks a view of the transnational exchanges and activities of queer worldmaking projects that assembled and maintained new political communities across uneven geographies and ideological divides. These transnational solidarities were generative of new political terrains and subjectivities, which included not only political knowledges but also variegated material arrangements (cf. Featherstone, 2012). In building from the understanding that transnational dynamics, processes, and scales are constitutive of queer worldmaking, I am not only seeking to correct nation-based frameworks, painting a fuller history of queer struggle, but more fundamentally to challenge dominant conceptions of queerness, resistance, and political agency.

As Clare Hemmings (2011: 1) notes, historical narratives matter. They are entangled with global relations of power and 'intersect with wider institutionalizations' of meaning. The stakes are high because renarrativizations can 'allow a different vision of a [queer] past, present, and future' by reinserting omissions, silences, and exclusions into the historical record. Although Hemmings (ibid.: 27) acknowledges that interventions that seek primarily to *correct* dominant histories are important, she is carefully attuned to the limitations of such projects and instead proposes ways of storytelling that do not fall prey to the prioritization of 'the unknown over the known and refusal over acceptance.' Certainly my transnational renarrativization of queer political history ironically introduces a new series of erasures and silences in its pursuit of a 'fuller' history. I prioritize certain transnational sites over others, incorporate only the transnational activities on which sufficient archival material was available to me, and cite certain sources at the expense of others. Moreover, my claim to have arrived at a 'new' history of queerness and revolutionary politics is animated by a desire to see this history occupy a

central position in our collective imaginations of queerness and by personal political investments. The effort to write a transnational history of radical sexual politics necessarily proceeds from a specific, interested position internal to the history that it aspires to grasp.

There is therefore no doubt that this thesis risks producing a novel set of disavowals and forcing an excess of analytical coherence and orderliness onto the historical record. These risks are especially evident in my relatively rigid model of periodization. The hope to correlate the historical stages of American hegemony to emergent social movements is motivated — it would be disingenuous not to admit — by the strategic benefits it promises: the combination of analytical and historical, causal and narrative insights. This attempt to link historical periods and political forms displaces relevant cases that cannot be easily formalized within my framework of periodization (such as lesbian separatism or the feminist sex wars), reinforces the already overstated distinctions between social movements (such as the gay liberation movement and the women's liberation movement), is inclined to substitute linear temporal narratives of progress for cyclical ones of crisis and restoration, can tend toward determinism in its emphasis on the structural limitations within which social movements operate, and generally neglects the place of messiness in its accounts. Nevertheless, my wager is that these are risks worth taking.

The problems intrinsic to corrective historiography and periodization cannot be solved simply by abandoning these efforts altogether. The suppression of multiplicity for the composition of a unitary historical narrative is different from the historicization of that multiplicity. And even when the former taints the latter, as is so often the case, is it not against a structured historical narrative that exclusions and silences can be most clearly assessed? Within queer studies, the value of these historicizing efforts is especially pronounced since the field has been relatively isolated from the discipline of history. The job and publication opportunities of queer theorists, who are often employed by English departments, have expanded significantly since the field's ascendancy in the nineties, but lesbian and gay historians have not received the same level of institutional support. As Lisa Duggan (1994: 187) points out, this has led to a concentration of queer scholarship within literary and media studies and a concomitant 'impoverishment of the empirical, historical grounding for textual analyses

of various sorts.’ Duggan’s overview of the infrastructural and institutional arrangements of the academy shows that the separation of queer studies from gay and lesbian studies both reflects and reproduces specific material disciplinary boundaries that are detrimental to the advancement of both queer theory and history, and solidifies the relative isolation of both fields.

This split has had numerous detrimental effects on queer scholarship. First, queer theory has been known to abstract its categories of analysis from the wider historical and social relations within which they emerge (Amin, 2017; Love, 2021). Kevin Floyd (2009: 115) expresses this tendency as a focus ‘less on history than on the “historicity” of discourse.’ Using Judith Butler’s work on performativity as a case study, he elaborates this claim by arguing that queer scholarship is ‘more interested in the historical character of discourse than in the way historically specific discourses are impacted, inflected, and reshaped by social determinants irreducible to the specific discourse in question.’ Following Kathi Weeks (1996: 96), we might say that the ahistoricity of much queer scholarship, the failure to connect the processes it investigates to the wider historical forces that induce such processes, leads to decontextualized claims that are historically ‘underdetermined.’ Second, David Halperin (2003: 342) has observed that, as queer theory advances, ‘lesbian and gay studies, which by contrast would seem to pertain only to lesbians and gay men, looks increasingly backward, identitarian, and outdated.’ For Halperin, the establishment of queer theory as an institutionalized academic discipline went hand in hand with a portrayal of gay and lesbian studies ‘as under-theorized, as laboring under the delusion of identity politics’ (ibid.: 341). Queer theory’s divergence from gay and lesbian studies represented itself as a re-orientation away from the monolithic categories ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian,’ toward those differences that are foreclosed by the homo-hetero binary (Wiegman, 2012: 117). This suggestion that queer studies signaled a radical shift away from assumptions of settled sexual and gender identities, and the elisions of specific identities and experiences that these assumptions entail, is misleading. As William B. Turner (2000) shows in his genealogy of queer theory, gay male historians had been debating the socially constructed nature of the hetero/homosexual division long before the emergence of queer theory. Through the work of Jonathan Ned Katz, Jeffrey Weeks, Carrol Smith-Rosenberg, Mary McIntosh, and John D’Emilio, Turner (ibid.: 63) traces the various accounts

of the historical emergence of ‘homosexuality’ and ‘heterosexuality’ as categories that were presumed to inhere in human bodies, noting that ‘no scholar ever addressed himself as essentialist.’

My periodization of queer worldmaking hopes to defy the disciplinary boundaries that have reified the opposition between theory and history within queer scholarship. Engaging with the relations between theory and its larger institutional matrix admits a more reflexive stance towards the historical, social, and affective forces that inflect my own theoretical dispositions, commitments, and categories of analysis. Refusing the division between theory and history also allows me to take histories of queer worldmaking seriously as collective theoretical articulations of political struggle. The queer militants in this study often held fraught relationships to formal centers of knowledge production, academic disciplinarity, and professionalization. Their uneven proximity to such institutions shaped the questions they asked, the stakes of their analyses, their modes of engagement with theory, and their sense of positionality and accountability. They inaugurated a rich and inventive body of revolutionary thought that was cultivated across various spaces (from political organizations to university settings), traveled transnationally, and authorized political projects. This study therefore can be said to attempt a social history of theory (cf. Bardawil, 2020). Accordingly, my corpus of primary documents includes both scholarly and non-scholarly texts (such as manifestos, political speeches, open letters, memoirs of prominent activists, and correspondences). I treat non-scholarly texts not only as an archive but also as a source of theoretical discourse, and treat scholarly texts not only as abstract academic theory but also as historical artifacts.

## Chapter overview

According to the traditional history of the gay liberation movement of the late sixties and early seventies, narrated within a narrow domestic framework, the movement was divided into an assimilationist faction on the one hand, represented by the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA), and a radical faction on the other, led by such groups as the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR). Chapter One provides a history of gay liberationism that foregrounds



its transnational dimensions. This transnational reading illuminates a schism within the gay liberation movement that is obscured by the standard assimilationism versus radicalism dichotomy. The more fundamental division within the movement, I argue, was between the formation of a gay internationalism and the consolidation of gay nationalism. The former — ‘gay internationalism’ — was entangled with anti-systemic formations at home and abroad in a struggle against the nuclear household, the nation-state, and other forces the liberationists considered tethered to sexism and imperialism. The latter strategies, which I term ‘assimilationist nationalism’ and ‘separatist nationalism’ respectively, sought to redress the outlaw status of homosexual subjects — either through the attainment of equal rights under the law or through settler colonial, territorial occupation. The emancipatory horizons of gay nationalism were constrained by the belief that the predicament of homosexual oppression could only be resolved through the nation-state form.

Chapter One situates gay internationalism within the context of the insurrectionary movements of the period, including Third World radicalism, the Black Power movement, anti-war protests, militant student organizing, the women’s liberation movement, and various countercultural groups. Through their transnational activities, I argue that gay internationalists like Mario Mieli, Dennis Altman, David Fernbach, and Allen Young articulated new conceptions of sexual expression, identity, and liberation. Appropriating and inverting Freud’s view of sexual development, the gay internationalists proposed that the social order was stabilized through a violent eradication of the ‘pansexuality’ of the human. This explained the oppression of sexual deviants, those who dared to explore the natural condition of bisexuality, and prescribed a solution: the eroticization of all spheres of life. However, the gay liberationists were also forced to confront the risks and limitations of their internationalism. Solidarity from their comrades in anti-imperialist, anti-war, and other New Left movements was often tenuous at best. Nowhere more was the relationship between the gay internationalists and their putative comrades tested than in the context of transnational organizing with the Cuban state. The limits of solidarity were put to the test when the so-called Venceremos Brigades brought the political ambitions of the gay liberation movement, the New Left, and the Cuban revolutionary regime together.

When the transnational connections and encounters of the gay liberation movement are made legible, what comes into view is the centrality of movements for sexual liberation to the broader trajectory of revolutionary formations of the sixties and seventies. The gay liberationists both contributed substantially to radical movements and incited generative conflict within them, for instance by challenging the exclusions that shaped the contours of Cuban tricontinentalism. Indeed, this transnational history encourages us to re-examine the political frame of internationalism itself. The gay internationalists argued that the unity proffered by the internationalist Left forestalled sexual liberation. Their New Left comrades, they insisted, held a truncated vision of internationalism, and true liberation could therefore only be achieved by exposing the exclusions through which this unity was established and sustained. In short, gay internationalism sheds light on the domesticating and deradicalizing influence that the ‘straight’ internationalism of the New Left exerted on the gay liberation movement, thereby belying its own promise.

Chapter Two shifts focus to the black lesbian feminist movement of the following decade. The traditional story of this movement sees its formation as a *response* to the misogyny of Black Power activists, on the one hand, and the racism within women’s liberation, on the other. The US-centric focus of this standard view of the movement particularizes it as a self-defensive reaction to the dominant movements of the period, rather than as an autonomous movement with its own independent genealogy and development. It brackets the connections to Third World feminist struggles through which black feminism established itself. This chapter argues that the movement within the US emerged from transnational circuits of intellectual and activist practices. The black feminists refused to allow the field of their political vision and analysis to be determined by the boundaries of the nation-state, and carried forward a long tradition of black internationalist feminism that had been developing over the course of the twentieth century. In particular, it argues that without sustaining a transnational and multi-generational perspective on the movement we misapprehend, or altogether miss, the significance of its sexual politics. Although the political climate of the early seventies restricted the possibilities for black activists to publicly identify as lesbian, members of the movement nonetheless developed revolutionary analyses of non-heteronormative racial formations.

Over the course of the second half of the decade, more and more black feminists espoused an avowedly lesbian standpoint whilst maintaining the anti-imperialist consciousness of earlier black feminist writers and activists.

The chapter unearths the connections between the political imaginaries of the US black feminist tradition and anti-imperialist and anti-colonial movements in the Third World. The black feminist movement, it argues, articulated forceful critiques of the racialized sexual subjugation of Third World women. Importantly, an exploration of these historically occluded political and affective ties reveals widespread misconceptions about the sexual politics of the black feminist movement. First, it shows that the black feminists articulated powerful critiques of the racialized prescriptions of heteronormativity by situating the state's pathologization of black non-heteronormative family formations within a history of white supremacist violence. This pathologization, for the black lesbian feminists, belonged to the long history of Western imperialism's obliteration of non-white intimate arrangements and non-binaristic organizations of gender and sexual life. Second, I argue that black lesbian writing on eroticism, sexuality, and desire advanced a tradition of anti-imperialist theorizing that probed imperialism's reorganization of subjectivity within the imperial core. This tradition, which can be traced back to V. I. Lenin and W. E. B. Du Bois, sought to elucidate how imperialist expansion engendered irreconcilable differences amongst the revolutionary classes of Western countries. Imperialism thereby obscured the common fate shared by oppressed people, now stratified along the axes of race, sexuality, and gender. This anti-imperialist perspective enabled the black lesbian feminists to explain the hold of heteropatriarchal and masculinist ideology on the black liberation movement, which was sowing disunity between black men and women. This insight led them to identify eroticism and lesbianism as potentially revolutionary acts that could undo the mystification of their shared interests with one another and with racialized subjects abroad.

The sexual politics of the black feminists cannot be insulated from the transnational identifications and internationalist visions of the movement as a whole. A transnational renarrativization of the black feminist movement clarifies how the separation of the imperial from the sexual commits a form of reductionism by imagining the transition from capitalist imperialism to

socialism as merely an economic and/or political transition that leaves the protected institutions of domesticity and privacy intact. For the black lesbian feminists, a total transformation of the current imperialist order would necessarily entail a transformation of sexual relations. Through their sexual politics, the black lesbian feminists were therefore able to radicalize and generalize anti-imperialist struggle.

The AIDS activist movement is a third history of radical queer struggle that cannot be fully made sense of outside of the global affairs of its time. The sexual politics of the AIDS activists has conventionally been siphoned off from the transnational connections and orientations that they forged in their fight against the vicissitudes of neoliberal globalization. The domestic lens that informs standard histories of the AIDS activist movement misses the multi-sited nature of the movement, often reducing its resistance to the emergent neoliberal order to its campaign for affording housing in the context of rampant real estate speculation and property development. The AIDS activists encountered and confronted sites of neoliberal state violence and capital accumulation that extended far beyond this campaign. These geopolitical and activist sites included the Nicaraguan Revolution, a central locus of solidarity work in the early AIDS years, Guantánamo Bay, where 300 HIV-positive Haitian refugees were detained, and the struggles against the 1991 Gulf War, the exploitation of migrant labor, and the destruction of social infrastructures. They allowed AIDS activists to create links between a range of issues that encompassed militarism, border politics, neoliberal privatization, public health, and sexuality.

The sexual politics of the AIDS activists, Chapter Three argues, was bound up with their broader politics of resistance against neoliberalism. It explores how texts written by radical members of the movement articulated safer sex and the refusal of monogamy, abstinence, and privatized sexuality as a direct and antagonistic confrontation with neoliberal capitalism's imposition of generalized precarity and its logics of property and privacy. The chapter then shifts focus to the burgeoning field of academic queer theory, which also formed within the context of radical AIDS activism yet had a more tentative relationship to the movement. The difficulty in assessing this relationship, I argue, is created by queer theory's own mystification of its specific history, its institutional constraints and pressures,

and its theoretical dispositions. This arises due to its treatment of anti-disciplinarity and mobility as constitutive features of the field, which themselves can become worryingly congruent with dominant forms of neoliberal consciousness. I argue that it is only through a historicization of queer theory — that is, an excavation of the broader social relations which made the institutionalization of queer theory possible in the first place — that a fuller picture of the field's limitations and critical potentialities emerges.

When queer academic knowledges from the nineties are contextualized within the transnational resistance politics of the AIDS activist movement, it becomes possible to generate counter-readings of canonical queer texts that bring their radical political impulses to the fore. A historicization of the field in relation to the social transformations and queer political struggles of its time reveals an insistence on the possibility of achieving sexual liberation through an embrace of eroticism, promiscuity, and vulnerability (rather than individualism, private property, and bourgeois sexual morality). The categories and concepts found within queer scholarship (including vulnerability, relationality, self-shattering, and the death drive) can be understood as attempting the same maneuver as the radical AIDS activists: to resist the privatizing logics of neoliberalism and the destruction of collective queer life, not by denying but by reveling in the entanglements of human bodies. The imposition of precarity reveals the ways in which we are mutually implicated in each others' lives — through violence, coercion, and exploitation, yet also through desire, love, and collectivity. Neoliberalism thereby exposes the interconnectedness of our lives, enabling political imaginaries of a world built to sustain and nurture those connections. Accordingly, queer theory finds the possibility for political intervention outside of legitimate reproduction (both procreation and inheritance), normative kinship, and moral conservatism. It rejects the privatized forms through which neoliberalism transmits the future, demanding instead an inheritance of the future that is held in common.

Chapter Four asks what conceptions of queerness, revolutionary politics, and pleasure these transnational renarrativizations of queer worldmaking projects generate. It starts by illustrating how the subsumption of desire and pleasure has historically secured the conditions for the expansion of

American hegemony. The production of ostensibly universal national ideals has been integral to managing a constitutive contradiction between US state and capital: while the state promises homogeneity, equivalence, and resolution, capital depends upon differentiation, hierarchy, and exclusion. National ideals conceal the gendered, sexualized, and racialized divisions upon which the reproduction of capital depends by positing themselves as universal, singular, and inclusive. Crucially, the mass identification of such ostensibly universal national ideals was facilitated by the subsumption of desire by capitalist social relations. Under Fordism, the ostensibly universal ideal of the suburban nuclear family disavowed the pathologization and repression of queer and racialized populations who were unable to assimilate to the heteronormative prescriptions of family life. This family model promised an array of desires and pleasures associated with leisure time within the home. Under neoliberalism, the heteronormative family became a privatized alternative to the support structures of the Fordist welfare state. The sanctification of the private family masked the processes of dispossession, displacement, and death that constituted the underside of neoliberal gentrification, privatization, and redevelopment. No longer sustained by institutions of the state, the private family reproduced itself instead through affective structures. The private family became the site of projected fantasies of well-being, happiness, and longevity. During both the Fordist and neoliberal stages of American hegemony, the subsumption of desire was central to the reinforcement of social integration — establishing an illusion of sameness among members of the national body politic, while disavowing the particular racialized and non-normative gender and sexual hierarchies that were integral to the reproduction of the American hegemonic order.

Chapter Four ventures a socio-theoretical analysis of forty years of queer worldmaking. It situates gay liberationism, black feminism, and AIDS activism in relation to the Fordist and neoliberal regimes of accumulation and shows how these transnational movements sought to negate the governing fictions of the American hegemonic order. The subsumption of desire was never total. Seizing upon the cracks within the incomplete integration of desire within the social order, projects of queer worldmaking were able to articulate queerness not only as a condition of pathologization, stigmatization, and subordination, but also as a site of insurrectionary pleasures, eroticism, and

sociality. They politicized various queer formations, treating them as sources of non-heteronormative kinship, erotic enjoyment, and sexual pleasure. In other words, queer worldmaking practices found within queerness possibilities for rebellion and resistance against the gendered and sexualized stratifications upon which United States hegemony depended. They connected sexual freedom — understood expansively as the celebration of unsanctioned pleasures and desires, the legitimation of non-heteronormative familial structures, the proliferation of egalitarian relations of care and love, and the securing of bodily autonomy — to a broader demand for social transformation. However, this politics of pleasure was a risky endeavor. The political pursuit of bodily and erotic pleasures did not constitute an inherently antagonistic practice. Although it contained emancipatory promises, it risked continual recuperation and subsumption. Desire could animate radical struggles, yet it could not guarantee their success. Chapter Four argues that queer worldmaking practices were defined by a (counter-)investment in pleasure as a proxy for the total transformation of social relations. However, when severed from their broader political horizon, their articulations of pleasure could be deftly recuperated and harnessed for the renewal of the social order.

Finally, the conclusion considers the implications of my study for the sexual politics of the twenty-first century. After the September 11 attacks in 2001, the strategy of global rule pursued by the United States shifted from a multilateral, consent-based approach to a unilateral, more overtly coercive one. This shift signaled a crisis in America's ability to sustain its hegemonic position on the world stage and revived the terms 'empire' and 'imperialism' as designations of its structural character. The figure of the patriot emerged as the dominant national subjectivity to mediate the novel set of contradictions that were generated by the American exceptionalism of the global war on terror, sanctioning the segregation of racialized and non-normatively sexualized populations deemed threatening to the health of the national population.

In recent years, the self-undermining tendencies of capitalism appear to have outstripped its ability to reproduce itself, as successive recessions, the coronavirus pandemic, inter-imperialist war in Ukraine, and resurgent far-right nationalist movements continuously challenge the foundations of the old order. The intensifying contradictions of imperial crisis, just as they were displaced onto single

black mothers in the mid-seventies, are today displaced primarily onto trans people and racialized immigrants. Within this context, a new generation of radical transfeminist writers are carrying forward the long tradition of queer revolutionary writing that rearticulates their position of subordination as a critical standpoint from where to develop visions of bodily autonomy, pleasure, and affirmation that can serve as the horizon of a liberatory politics.



# **I. Politicizing homosexuality: The inter/nationalism of the gay liberation movement**

Within the United States, the gay liberation movement began to expand and spread rapidly after the riots sparked by a police raid at the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York's Greenwich Village, in the summer of 1969. Shortly after the Stonewall rebellion, the first Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was formed (Hobson, 2016: 25-26). Within a year, there would be GLF chapters in over ten US cities (Rimmerman, 2015: 23). Whilst the gay liberation movement had greater racial and class diversity than the earlier homophile movement, most GLF chapters were predominantly white and middle-class (Stein, 2012: 82-83). Various caucuses for people of color within GLF chapters renamed themselves as Third World gay groups. Initially the gay liberation movement was composed of both men and women, yet many lesbians also began to organize separately. Radicalesbians, a New York group of lesbians, had begun as a GLF-NY women's caucus. Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), founded by Sylvia Rivera and Marsha Johnson in New York in 1970, was composed primarily of poor, gender-nonconforming, and transgender street activists (Hobson, 2016: 26). Outside of the United States, gay liberation groups formed in Canada, Australasia, Latin America, and numerous Western European countries. In London, Aubrey Walter and Bob Mellors called the first meeting of the London GLF in 1970 upon their return from New York. The GLF became active in several major British cities. A Gay Liberation Front also formed in Vancouver in 1970, and in Montreal and Toronto in 1972 (Adam, 1987: 83-84). In 1971, the Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire (FHAR) was founded in France, and the Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionario Italiano (Unitarian Revolutionary Homosexual Front), more commonly known as *Fuori!* (meaning 'come out'), was formed in Milan, with an active presence in Rome and Turin. Belgium and Holland developed similar left-oriented gay liberation movements (Weeks, 1990: 189). Rosa von Praunheim's film *Not the Homosexual is Perverse, But the Situation in Which He Lives* is often credited with the emergence of gay

liberation groups across German campuses, and a Frente de Liberación Homosexual was established both in Mexico City and in Argentina, in 1971 and 1973 respectively (Adam, 1987: 89).

The rise of these political groups marked a radical break from the so-called ‘homophile movement’ of the fifties and sixties, a relatively small civil rights movement composed of a variety of organizations, including the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis. Despite its initial radicalism under the leadership of Communist Party member Harry Hay, Mattachine soon re-oriented around a reformist agenda and embraced the psychiatric establishment’s view of homosexuality as a disorder, even as they contended that their ‘condition’ was not ‘curable’ and did not warrant social and legal discrimination (Duberman, 2019: 93-94). The extent to which the homophile movement laid the groundwork for the gay liberation movement is much debated amongst historians and sociologists (Valocchi, 1999: 60). Whilst the liberationists themselves largely dismissed homophile activism as conservative, ineffective, and ensnared in respectability, historians like Marc Stein (2012: 80) have argued that these ‘simplistic portrayals of the homophile movement’ were the outcome of liberationists’ conscious attempt to affiliate themselves with ‘the mass mobilization, political radicalization, and substantive gains of the late 1960s and early 1970s.’

The identification of the gay liberationists with the insurrectionary movements of the sixties can hardly be overstated. The New Left’s radical analyses of global systems of oppression — imperialism, capitalism, and sexism — ‘provided crucial ideological resources’ for the politicization of homosexuality (Valocchi, 2001: 455). The gay liberationists adopted, expanded on, and reworked many left-wing ideas to develop their own distinct ideology of sexual liberation which was articulated and circulated in manifestoes, pamphlets, newspapers, and a burgeoning gay national press (Seidman, 1995: 120). Moreover, the New Left’s militancy inspired the confrontational and coalitional political strategies of the gay liberationist groups. In the words of the Puerto Rican and Venezuelan transgender street activist Sylvia Rivera (1999: 13): ‘All of us were working for so many movements at the time. Everyone was involved with the women’s movement, the peace movement, the civil rights movement. We were all radicals. I believe that’s what brought it about.’

This chapter examines the various ideological orientations and political strategies of gay liberationism from the late sixties to the early seventies, with a particular focus on the US context. Virtually all scholarly accounts of the US lesbian and gay movement of this period divide the movement into an assimilationist strand, represented by the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA), and a more radical strand associated with such groups as the Gay Liberation Front, Third World Gay Revolution, Radicalesbians, Red Butterfly, and STAR (Rimmerman, 2015). This familiar story of assimilationism versus radicalism is largely narrated within the narrow domestic frame that characterizes US sexual historiography. My contention in this chapter is that the standard narration of this history is unsettled when the transnational takes center stage. A transnational renarrativization demonstrates that the eruption of lesbian and gay political energies in the late sixties is better understood as bifurcating into a nationalist and internationalist strand. The former sought to redress the outlaw status of homosexual subjects — either through the attainment of legal rights or through territorial occupation. Its emancipatory horizons were constrained by the promise of state recognition and nationhood respectively. The latter strand identified with other anti-systemic struggles at home and abroad in a movement against the private nuclear household, the nation-state, and other forces they considered tethered to sexism and imperialism. Before addressing these schisms, however, I turn to the anti-imperialist foundations of the movement and trace their impact on its historical trajectory.

### The anti-imperialist beginnings of gay liberationism

Many of the gay liberation movement's first recruits had been active in protest movements against US state violence, from police violence at home to imperialist wars abroad. A brief profile of two visible activists, Kiyoshi Kuromiya and Karla Jay, demonstrates the range of political experiences that gays and lesbians brought to the nascent liberation struggle. Kiyoshi Kuromiya was an Asian American gay activist who energetically participated in a range of sixties social movements and co-founded GLF-Philadelphia in 1970 (Ferguson, 2019: 37). Kiyoshi, born in a World War II internment camp for Japanese Americans in Wyoming, found his way into activism during his

undergraduate studies as a member of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). He led sit-ins with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and marched from Selma to Montgomery with Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1965. He also joined the homophile movement despite his impatience with its assimilationist agenda (Highleyman, 2009: 18). His opposition to the US war in Vietnam was central to his political activism. At the 1968 Chicago protests against the Democratic National Convention, Kuromiya distributed a poster proclaiming ‘Fuck the Draft,’ and on a separate occasion at the University of Pennsylvania, he spread a rumor that a dog would be napalmed on the campus; ‘when 2,000 people gathered to protest, he said he wished they were equally concerned about the people of Vietnam’ (ibid.: 18-19). In September 1970, Kiyoshi attended the Revolutionary People’s Constitutional Convention (RPCCC), a conference organized by the Black Panther Party (BPP) at Temple University, as one of around 60 openly gay delegates.

Karla Jay was a member both of the feminist collective Redstockings and GLF-NY. Unlike Kuromiya, she had not actively participated in protests until the late sixties. The Columbia University protests of April 1968 were a major turning point for her in this regard. The upheaval was a response to the university’s involvement in the gentrification of Harlem through the planned construction of new facilities, as well as to its affiliation with government-sponsored weapons research. Duberman (2019: 148-50) explains that Columbia radicals understood the university’s encroachment on the lives of black residents in Harlem and its complicity in what was being referred to as the military-industrial complex as inextricably bound through a unified system of oppression, rather than as two distinct phenomena linked only by their advancement by the same institution. Karla joined the occupations and speak-outs that ensued. She was radicalized as she learned more ‘dismaying details of Columbia’s callousness towards its black neighbors and of America’s brutality toward the Vietnamese’ and as she witnessed the violent police attacks on campus protesters (ibid.: 149). Karla was not the only Stonewall rebel whose political consciousness was raised through anti-war protests and marches. Yvonne Flowers, a black lesbian and close friend of writer Audre Lorde, was galvanized into action by the death of one of her co-workers at St. Vincent’s Hospital in Greenwich Village. Bernie, a Haitian immigrant who enlisted in the US army to cover the costs of medical school, was one of the first American soldiers to be killed in

the Vietnam War. Duberman (*ibid.*: 112-13) notes that when Yvonne ‘saw his name listed on the TV nightly news [...] she vowed to enlist more actively in the antiwar movement.’

From the very onset of the movement, gay liberationists drew connections between the national liberation struggles of the Third World and their own. By adopting the word ‘liberation’ and ‘front’ in its name, the Gay Liberation Front sought to reflect its affinities with the National Liberation Fronts of Vietnam and Algeria, and the politics of anti-imperialism more broadly (Stein, 2012: 82). Similarly, Third World Gay Revolution, one former member recalls, added the word ‘revolution’ ‘because it made us feel like brothers and sisters of the national revolutionary movements that were happening all over the world at the time’ (Latrónico, 2009: 51). The Berkeley Gay Liberation Theater’s street performance entitled ‘No Vietnamese Ever Called Me a Queer,’ which was staged in October 1969, attests to this attempt to suture the gap between anti-militarist politics and gay identity. The performance was named after Muhammad Ali’s statement that ‘no Viet Cong ever called me nigger’ when he refused the war draft. The Gay Liberation Theater sought to expose the perversity of ‘send[ing] men half way around the world to kill their brothers while we torment, rape, jail, and murder men for loving their brothers here’ (as quoted in Hobson, 2016: 18). The theater group therefore sought to aggregate various political horizons, from sexual freedom to anti-imperialism, under the umbrella of a politicized gay identity. These political alliances were more than rhetorical. The GLF-SF, for instance, shared an office with the War Resisters League (*ibid.*: 29), and GLF-Boston’s first action was to join an anti-war protest with signs that provocatively read ‘Bring the Boys Home / GLF’ (Kyper, 2009: 33). Gay liberationist groups in over fifty cities endorsed anti-war campaigns (Suran, 2001: 473-74).

Homosexuality was a disqualification from military service at the time. Gay men who declared themselves homosexual at induction were excluded from civil service jobs and risked public stigma. Nevertheless, gay liberationists began to urge men to choose stigma over war. GLF-LA distributed leaflets on ‘revolutionary homosexual draft resistance’ and affirmed gay identity as a political strategy of anti-militarism through scandalizing slogans like ‘send the troops to bed together’ and ‘suck cock to beat the draft’ (Hobson, 2016: 28-29). Since participation in the war was out of the question for Sylvia

Rivera, she appeared at her local draft board in Jersey City in full drag. She was immediately sent to the induction center's psychiatrist, who pronounced her homosexual and sent her home (Duberman, 2019: 157-58). The anti-militarism of Rivera and the other gay liberationists stood in stark contrast to the homophile movement's campaign for military inclusion. The liberationists articulated a gay identity that was structured around opposition to the imperialist wars of the US state — that is, they identified military masculinity as a role that was imposed upon men to further the interests of the US imperialist state. The Gay Mayday Tribe described its position at a 1971 anti-war demonstration in Washington thus: 'War is an extension of our own oppression because it reinforces the masculine image of males and forces them into playing roles where the end result is the death of millions of people' (Young, 1972a: 20). War and imperialism were characterized as an extension of heterosexuality, since they resulted from the socialization into conventional masculinity, and 'gay,' in turn, became coupled to an anti-war, anti-imperialist political position. Jim Rankin, a gay liberationist from Berkeley, affirmed the linkage between gayness and anti-imperialism when he framed the repression of gay desire as 'the first imperialism' and referred to homosexuals as 'already a conquered territory' (as quoted in Suran, 2001: 470).

The politicization of homosexuality was also achieved through a refusal to disarticulate gay identity from the issue of police brutality. In a July 1969 issue of the newspaper *Berkeley Tribe*, Leo Laurence, co-founder of the Bay Area Committee for Homosexual Freedom (CHF), wrote that a Black Panther official had approved the distribution of a CHF leaflet at a rally in Bobby Hutton park. The leaflet included the following statement: 'Vice pigs in Los Angeles beat a homosexual to death a few months ago. In Berkeley, vice pigs shot and murdered another homosexual in his own car. In Oakland, a "straight" professor the pigs thought was "queer" was beaten, and later died, by the pigs' (Laurence, 1969: 7). It was the numerous police murders of gay men, Jared Leighton (2019: 863) argues, that 'put organizing against police brutality at the forefront of gay liberation activism in California and led gay activists to identify more closely with the Panthers.' Indeed, the Committee for Homosexual Freedom, which was formed in April 1969 and later renamed San Francisco's Gay Liberation Front, forged political alliances with the Black Panther Party in their shared struggle against police brutality. In Los

Angeles, the Gay Liberation Front even created a collective self-defense group called ‘Gay Action Patrol’ to observe the police (Young, 1972a: 12). The struggle against police brutality was of course not confined to the West Coast. In New York, a ‘Gay Community Prisoner Defense Committee’ was formed in response to the case of Raymond Lavon Moore, a black gay man who died in police custody in November 1970 (*The Advocate*, 1971: 20), and the Chicago Gay Liberation (1970: 346, 348) famously stated at the RPCC in no uncertain terms: ‘Although we recognize that homosexuals have been oppressed in all societies, it is the struggle against that oppression in the context of American imperialism that faces us. [...] Our most immediate oppressors are the pigs.’

This final quote’s conception of police brutality as one facet of US imperialism is not unfamiliar. The Black Panthers placed the operations of the US state, both domestic and foreign, within a single frame. Their understanding of the US black freedom struggle refuted the separation of the condition of black Americans and of colonized peoples in Asia, Africa, and Latin America by embedding it within the tradition of Third World anti-colonialism. According to Sean L. Malloy (2017: 72), the key premises of the Black Panther Party’s anti-colonial vernacular were ‘an emphasis on the colonial status of black Americans, a rhetorical and symbolic emphasis on the centrality of violence in the process of both colonialism and decolonization, and the assertion that white supremacy and capitalism were inextricably linked as historical forces.’ Whereas the civil rights movement had constructed black Americans as citizens that had been denied their rights — a diagnosis that placed their analysis of racism firmly within the domestic frame of the nation-state — these premises enabled the Panthers to tie themselves to anti-colonial groups across the Third World. Ideological tools like the term ‘pig’ were used to refer to police power in urban US black communities *and* to the US government’s puppet regimes around the world (ibid.: 85). That the gay liberationists adopted this internationalist frame from the Panthers can be observed in the manifesto of the Third World Gay Revolution (1971: 366), named ‘What We Want, What We Believe’ after the BPP’s Ten-Point Program. Its thirteenth demand states: ‘We want an end to military oppression both at home and abroad.’

The gay liberation movement’s embrace of the Panthers’ analysis of imperialism occurred on a stylistic, ideological, and institutional level. The gay liberationists adopted much of the terminology

connected to Black Power activism. The use of the epithet ‘pig’ for police officers illustrates their appropriation of the radical rhetorical styles present within the militant activism of the period (Jay and Young, 1992: xxxv). Other examples include Carl Wittman’s (1970: 330) characterization of physical attacks on gays as ‘lynching’ in his influential ‘A Gay Manifesto;’ crude analogies such as the claim that ‘chick equals nigger equals queer’ (ibid.: 332); and slogans like ‘Gay is good,’ which were imitative of ‘Black is beautiful’ (Jay and Young, 1992: xxxv-xxxvi). However, this rhetorical interdiscursivity was indicative of a deeper renegotiation of gay identity that linked gay oppression, imperialism, and racism together in an associative chain. Analogies between the struggles of various social groups suffuse the writings and iconography of the gay liberation movement. They should be understood not simply as an attempt to establish a reductive equivalence between the experiences of women, racialized populations, and sexual outlaws, but rather as an attempt to comprehend the repression of homosexuality through the prisms of racism and sexism. Indeed, Laurence often referred to what would later be termed ‘homophobia’ as ‘sexual racism’ (Leighton, 2019: 862), and Allen Young (1972a: 13), a member of GLF-NY, even ventured the claim that what counts as a permissible or legal sexual practice is entangled with the US history of settler colonialism: ‘In some states, all sex is illegal unless it is done by a married couple in the “missionary position” [...] so named because Christian missionaries insisted that the Indians use this position and give up their evil variations.’

The unviability of divorcing the liberationists’ conception of gay oppression from the Black Panther Party’s analysis of imperialism — in particular, their conception of racism as a form of ‘internal colonialism’ — can be illustrated via the widely-used concept of the ‘gay ghetto.’ In her pioneering research on the history of the Bay Area’s gay and lesbian left, Emily K. Hobson (2016: 26) writes that the gay liberationists ‘used the concept of the gay ghetto to describe a wide-ranging social system that constrained sexuality and gender.’ Carl Wittman’s ‘A Gay Manifesto’ opens with the following statement:

San Francisco is a refugee camp for homosexuals. [...] [W]e have fled from blackmailing cops, from families who disowned or ‘tolerated’ us; we have been drummed out of the armed



services, thrown out of schools, fired from jobs, beaten by punks and policemen. And we have formed a ghetto, out of self-protection. It is a ghetto rather than a free territory because it is still theirs. Straight cops patrol us, straight legislators govern us, straight employers keep us in line, straight money exploits us.

(Wittman, 1970: 330)

In the view of many liberationists, the 'gay ghetto' named a system of exploitation and repression that was upheld through the same social structures that controlled the 'black colonies' within the US. As Wittman's (*ibid.*: 340) manifesto claims, 'our common enemies are: police, city hall, capitalism.' The term 'gay ghetto' was therefore one way for gay and lesbian activists to reconceptualize gender and sexual liberation as a fundamental transformation in structures and relations of power, breaking with the homophile movement's conception of justice as the recognition of homosexuality as a minoritarian status and drawing parallels between the conditions of gay and black urban life. Many gay ghettos were in fact contiguous with the black ghettos in the US.

The alliances between the gay liberationists and the Black Panther Party existed by no means only on a rhetorical or ideological level. One of GLF-NY's very first public actions in July 1969 was to join a Black Panther demonstration (Stein, 2012: 85). One year later, on the day of the Stonewall commemoration, the marchers intentionally passed by the Women's House of Detention, where Afeni Shakur (a member of the 'Panther 21') was being held, chanting 'Free Our Sisters! Free Ourselves!' (Hobson, 2016: 46). The Gay Women's Liberation (GWL), a Bay Area lesbian feminist organization formed in 1969, was guided by the Black Panther Party's strategy of collective self-defense in their resistance work against rape, domestic abuse, and street harassment. The poet Pat Parker was a member of both GWL and the BPP (Hobson, 2016: 51-52). Contact between the gay liberationist groups and the Black Panthers further deepened after August 1970, when Huey Newton announced on KPFA radio that women's and gay liberation were welcome in the revolutionary struggle (Leighton, 2019: 866). One week later, Newton (1970: 405) published a letter in the Black Panther Party's newspaper in which he wrote: '[T]here's nothing to say that a homosexual cannot also be a revolutionary. And

maybe I'm now injecting some of my prejudice by saying that "even a homosexual can be a revolutionary." Quite on the contrary, maybe a homosexual could be the most revolutionary.' This reflection demonstrates, in the words of Roderick Ferguson (2019: 34), '[Newton's] attempt to legitimate homosexuality as a social difference that could be radically politicized.' Towards the end of the letter, Huey entreats the Panthers to remove the terms 'faggot' and 'punk' from their vernacular, as these terms were designed for 'men who are enemies of the people' and '[h]omosexuals are not enemies of the people' (Newton, 1970: 406).

This was a groundbreaking event, especially given that many liberationists considered the Black Panther Party to be 'the vanguard of the people's revolution in Amerikkka' and saw Huey Newton as embodying the true revolutionary spirit (*Come Out!*, 1970c: 15). Following Newton's speech, Afeni Shakur requested a meeting with the Gay Liberation Front that took place at Jane Fonda's Upper East Side penthouse (Hobson, 2016: 32). When lesbian and gay liberationists were invited to participate in the BPP's Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention, it became clear that Newton was serious about making good on his assurance about gay liberation's place in the revolution. At the convention, Afeni Shakur spoke to the Male Homosexual Workshop. One gay man in attendance recalled, as quoted in Leighton (2019: 871): 'She talked about how Huey Newton's statement would be used in the Panther Party, not as a party line, but as a basis for criticism and self-criticism to overcome anti-homosexual hang-ups among party members, and in the black community.' And in an interview with Leslie Feinberg, Sylvia Rivera (1999: 13) recounted: 'I met Huey Newton at the Peoples' Revolutionary Convention in Philadelphia in 1971. Huey decided we were part of the revolution — that we were revolutionary people.' She counted this brief encounter with Newton as one of the greatest moments of her life (Duberman, 2019: 308).

### The rise of gay nationalisms

The above section showed that the gay liberation movement was, from its onset, constitutively entangled with contemporaneous anti-imperialist struggles. The anti-imperialist ideological frame that

vanguard groups like the Black Panther Party articulated fundamentally shaped the incipient gay and lesbian movement. However, not all strands of the movement remained faithful to its anti-imperialist beginnings. In this section, I explore two strands of nationalist politics within the lesbian and gay movement. The former, which I term ‘assimilationist nationalism,’ disavowed all ties to anti-imperialist struggles since it believed that any (real or perceived) affiliations with those struggles would undermine its efforts to secure equality under the law for lesbian and gay citizens. The latter, which I refer to as ‘separatist nationalism,’ sought to legitimize its settler colonial ambitions to occupy indigenous land and establish political control over these territories through claims to be following the example of the black nationalists. Neither of these groups carried forward the anti-imperialist origins of the gay liberation movement, and both believed that the predicament of homosexual oppression and persecution could only be resolved through the nation-state form. Grouping these two institutionalized tendencies together under the category of gay nationalism, and then contrasting them to the internationalist faction of gay liberationism, I aim to contest and displace the standard division of the lesbian and gay movement into an ‘assimilationist’ and ‘anti-assimilationist’ faction that is found in familiar narratives of this history.

### *Assimilationist nationalism*

Many observers have noted the divide within the US gay liberation movement that was represented by the split between the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activists Alliance. The former held a far-reaching and open-ended understanding of liberation that was premised on the unity of oppressed people in the struggle against male supremacy, sexism, imperialism, and capitalist exploitation. The latter, often referred to as a ‘reformist’ or ‘assimilationist’ organization, was founded by disaffected GLF members who were more intent on working towards the elimination of laws that criminalized and constrained homosexual life (Young, 1972a: 25-26). Although the GAA was not established until half a year after the Stonewall riots, express divisions between gay ‘radicals’ and ‘assimilationists’ were present from the start. Randy Wicker and Dick Leitsch, two pioneering activists

within the homophile and gay liberation movements, denounced the Stonewall riots in highly charged terms. In 1988, Wicker (as quoted in Duberman, 2019: 255) recalled that the sight ‘of screaming queens forming chorus lines and kicking went against everything I wanted people to think about homosexuals,’ namely that ‘we were a bunch of drag queens in the Village acting disorderly and tacky and cheap.’ In response to the Stonewall riots, there were a number of organizing efforts against police raids and Mafia-run bars. Leitsch, the president of New York’s Mattachine Society, was reluctant to support these efforts since he feared that it would derail Mattachine’s hard-won relationship with New York City’s Mayor John Lindsay (Kissack, 1995: 110). Tom Burke (1969: 316) relays in an *Esquire* magazine essay that on July 4, a day after the Stonewall riots, Leitsch spoke at a public meeting in Greenwich Village where he cautioned the crowd against organizing new demonstrations because ‘the gay world must retain the favor the Establishment, especially those who make and change the laws.’ His warning that change would only be achieved ‘slowly by educating the straight community with grace and good humor’ caused an eruption among the crowd. According to Burke (*ibid.*: 318), Jim Fouratt, an anti-war protester and prominent member of the countercultural Yippie movement, interrupted Leitsch: ‘All the oppressed have got to unite! The system keeps us weak by keeping us separate. [...] We’ve got to work with *all* the New Left!’ He then left the meeting with a group of like-minded rebels, who began to discuss plans to form a group that would soon be called the Gay Liberation Front.

According to historian Marc Stein (2012: 100), the immediate reason for the formation of the GAA in December 1969, as well as similarly named organizations that appeared across the country, was GLF-NY’s decision to lend financial support to the Black Panther Party through a contribution to the legal defense fund of the Panther 21, a group of Panthers that had been arrested for allegedly planning coordinated bombing attacks. One faction of GLF-NY opposed the decision on the grounds that the Black Panthers were homophobic, as was apparent in their frequent use of the epithet ‘faggot,’ and split off to form the GAA. Their conviction that an exclusive focus on so-called ‘gay and lesbian issues’ represented the most effective strategy for mobilization led them to avoid associations with other movements. Indeed, the GAA’s constitution included a bylaw that stated that the group would not

endorse any candidate or organization that did not have gay and lesbian rights as their direct end (Kissack, 1995: 116-17). Other movements and minority groups were referred to as ‘alien issues’ (Duberman, 2019: 277) — a position that was stated bluntly in private correspondence, like in a letter where Dick Leitsch wrote that the Black Panthers ‘are none of our damned business, as homosexuals’ (ibid.: 267). In short, the birth of the GAA marked the institutionalization of fundamental divisions within the gay liberation movement that were present from the onset. The GAA and affiliated groups across the US became the most influential gay and lesbian organizations in the early seventies, with substantially more power to shape the larger movement than the GLF.<sup>4</sup>

In the early seventies, there was a concerted effort on the part of the GAA to disaffiliate with the Black Panthers and other ‘alien’ groups, and to dedicate the political and financial resources of the movement to securing basic rights for gays and lesbians. This strategic re-orientation had profound consequences for the wider philosophy of the homosexual movement. Within the historiography of the modern lesbian and gay movement, assimilationism, single-issue politics, reformism, and interest group advocacy have become some of its watchwords. This moment is also widely considered to have laid the foundation for the contemporary mainstream LGBTI rights movement. However, the relation between gay assimilationist programs and nationalist formations has yet to be thoroughly explicated. My argument is that the emergence of the Gay Activists Alliance as the most prominent gay and lesbian rights organization bound the larger movement to the prevailing structures of the US nation-state. The assimilationist politics of gay and lesbian rights organizations, from the early seventies until today, can therefore be reconceived as a form of nationalist politics.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This was in part due to the internal fracturing of the GLF itself. Many members created caucuses that eventually became offshoots. Influential New York activists, many of whom were alienated by the male-dominated politics of gay liberation or the underrepresentation of black and Latino members, broke away from the GLF into groups like Third World Gay Revolution, Red Butterfly, STAR, Radicalesbians, and the Salsa Soul Sisters.

<sup>5</sup> In her landmark text *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Jasbir Puar (2017) coined the term ‘homonationalism’ in order to expose the ties between the assimilation of some (bourgeois, white) gays and lesbians and the imperialist agenda of the US nation-state within the context of the twenty-first-century global war on terror. This critical intervention illustrated how in the past two decades the assimilationist strategies of mainstream LGBTI advocacy groups and institutions have become complicit in nationalist formations. We should not, however, understand Puar’s

The GAA's diagnosis of homosexual oppression, which conceived of gays and lesbians as American citizens who were denied their rights, and their strategy to redress this injustice through achieving full recognition and equality under the law, placed lesbian and gay activism within a domestic frame and rendered it structurally dependent upon the prevailing powers of the nation-state. It therefore implied a foreclosure of certain emancipatory horizons. The previous sections explored how in the sixties homosexuality was politicized through a shared outsider status, through an experience of estrangement from the institutions and ideals of the nuclear family and national belonging. In the seventies, the GAA and other assimilationist groups' promotion of formal legal equality and social acceptance undermined these shared experiences of exclusion. It therefore eroded the historical basis for revolutionary gay political formations with cross-class and multi-racial solidarities. Indeed, the anti-imperialist activities of the gay liberation movement explored in the previous section proved remarkably short-lived.

Without diminishing the significance of the legal victories that were won by the lesbian and gay rights movement of the seventies, it is worth considering how the elevation of the legal field as the primary sphere of social struggle tethered the lesbian and gay movement firmly to the nation-state. Within this rights-based model of social change, lesbians and gays were activated as political agents through the assertion of their rights and through the demands for recognition. They were therefore constituted as subjects who could participate in politics by subordinating themselves to the control of the nation-state, as the sole entity with the power to confer those rights. It was this particular predicament — namely, that gays and lesbians were able to *exert* power through their *subordination to* state power — that caused such intense anxieties about the GLF's potential to burn the bridges that had been built between the homosexual community and the existing institutional powers that could redress the community's legal and representational exclusion. This is how we might understand, for instance, Dick Leitsch's assertion that overt associations with the Black Panther Party 'endangered the liaisons we have made with civil-rights organizations' (as quoted in Duberman, 2019: 266-67).

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argument as a claim that sexual politics prior to the war on terror was wholly external or antithetical to US nationalism. The ways that earlier lesbian and gay rights organizing too was imbricated in nationalist politics has received less commentary within queer studies.

This way of locking the lesbian and gay movement into state power also required a particular reconstitution of homosexual identity. Making homosexuality the basis for claims of entitlement vis-à-vis the nation-state was only possible through the reification of homosexuality as a singular, unified, and stable category of subjects with fixed preferences, interests, and desires. Identity-based rights claims therefore gave rise to what has been referred to as the ‘ethnic model’ of homosexual identity. Steven Epstein (1990: 243) argues: ‘[G]ays in the 1970’s increasingly came to conceptualize themselves as a legitimate minority group, having a certain quasi-“ethnic” status, and deserving the same protections against discrimination that are claimed by other groups in our society.’ Sexual orientation, on this account, was considered analogous to skin color or ethnicity so that being a gay American was comparable to being Italian American, Japanese American, or African American. The ethnic model of homosexual identity reduced the politics of gay liberation to the self-interested, instrumental actions of a minority group to secure legal and social rewards on their own behalf, often in competition with other groups for recognition and resources from the nation-state. The effects of placing gay and lesbian activity on the terrain of the state can also be observed in the movement’s rhetoric, which increasingly appealed to traditional American ideals such as equal rights and freedom from persecution (ibid.: 278-79). In short, the assimilationist nationalism of the GAA consolidated the category of ‘homosexuality’ as a real, immutable fact that clearly delineated a minority group. This monolithic ‘ethnic’ group was conceived as a constituency of respectable American citizens who had been denied their basic rights. This strategy therefore concentrated political energy on the full legal and representational integration of homosexuals *as* homosexuals within the nation-state.

### ***Separatist nationalism***

The assimilationist strategy of the Gay Activists Alliance is commonly juxtaposed to the anti-assimilationist politics of the Gay Liberation Front. I reject the notion that the only, or most instructive, way to understand the history of the gay liberation movement is through this opposition. Exploring this history through the question of nationalism reveals an alternative division within the

gay liberation movement. To understand the gay liberation movement as bifurcating into a nationalist and internationalist strand illuminates dynamics and antagonisms that are obscured when the movement is divided into an assimilationist and anti-assimilationist camp. I have represented the assimilationist strategy as a form of gay nationalism, but to be anti-assimilationist is not necessarily to be anti-nationalist. On the contrary, an examination of the Gay Liberation Front's internal battles exposes the presence of significant nationalist impulses amongst anti-assimilationist activists. In short, nationalist impulses ran through both GAA and GLF activities. Contrasting them to the internationalist politics of the gay liberation movement provides a more elucidative heuristic for the study of modern sexual politics.

One particular episode brought the centrality of nationalism to gay liberation politics to the fore, attracting wide-spread media coverage and causing a permanent rift within the Gay Liberation Front. In 1970, prominent GLF members on the West Coast encouraged gays and lesbians across the US to 'migrate' en masse to California's rural Alpine County and establish a 'Stonewall Nation' (Stein, 2012: 86). This plan was originally formulated by activist Don Jackson at the West Coast Gay Liberation Conference in Berkeley on December 28, 1969. His proposal, Emily Hobson (2016: 34) recounts, was to build a 'gay territory,' 'homeland,' or 'colony' on the land of the Washoe tribe. Around 250 lesbians and gays would be enough to constitute a voting majority in the sparsely-populated county, and could hence easily establish a gay and lesbian administration and assume political power. A number of Bay Area radicals declared the formation of new organizations in support of the Alpine project, including the Bay Area Gays for Unification and Nationalism (BAGFUN), later renamed Northern California Alpine Liberation Front. They formed alliances with other gay nationalist groups, including LA's Gay Nationalist Society, San Diego's Stonewall Nation, and Portland's Stonewall National Society (Leighton, 2019: 869). The media was central in publicizing the plan. When Don Kilhefner announced at a GLF-LA press conference in October 1970 that as many as 300 gays and lesbians had arranged to settle in Alpine County on January 1, 1971, the story of Stonewall Nation became the object of national attention (Carter, 2015: 45). It was picked up with sensationalist headlines by the *Associated Press*, *Wall Street Journal*, *TIME Magazine*, *The New York*



*Times*, *San Francisco Examiner*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *London Observer* (ibid.: 65). In November 1970, however, GLF-Berkeley formally rejected the Alpine County plan with a two-thirds majority. *The Advocate*, one of the first national gay magazines, referred to this vote as ‘the first major split [...] of the West Coast Gay Liberation Movement’ (as quoted in Hobson, 2016: 38). The project was abandoned by April 1971.

Various separatist, nationalist, and colonial themes were made to cohere within the discourse of the Alpine project leaders. In his book *The Gay Militants*, Don Teal (1971: 314) characterized the Alpine project as a ‘gay takeover to establish a counterculture, a refuge for persecuted homosexuals, and a gay tourist mecca,’ and Karla Jay (1999: 213) wrote in her political memoir: ‘The fastest way to achieve true liberation, or so we believed, would be to find a place where we could all move and become the majority.’ Don Jackson (1970: 6) described it as ‘the idea of a Gay colony, and of Gay nationalism as a quicker way to freedom.’ Elsewhere, Jackson referred to the Washoe, the tribe on whose land the gay nationalists sought to settle, ‘as a “primitive tribe that still live separate from white people retaining much of their own ancient and folkways” [...] suggesting that a committee be set up to study the tribe’s ethnology, customs, mores, traditions, and attitudes toward homosexuality’ (Carter, 2015: 82). Gay liberation, as envisioned by the gay nationalists, would be achieved through establishing a territorial base on Washoe land, forming a majority voting bloc, and assuming control of the economic and political system. Don Kilhefner developed a three-point plan to counter any possible resistance among the inhabitants of Alpine County, invoking the right of self-defense for the gay and lesbian settlers (ibid.: 49).

The blending of settler colonial and anti-colonial rhetoric within the language of the gay nationalists is remarkable. Proponents of the Alpine project continually legitimized their plans to build a ‘gay colony’ by drawing equivalences between their own oppression and various anti-colonial struggles. ‘Gay nationalists,’ Jared Leighton (2019: 869) has argued, ‘believed they were adhering closely to Eldridge Cleaver’s principle of “liberating territory within the mother country” and Huey Newton’s teaching that “gay people will be free when they control the police power.”’ The San Francisco State Group, a gay student group at San Francisco State College founded by Charles Thorpe,

even proposed an ambassador of the Stonewall Colony to Algeria, where Eldridge and Kathleen Cleaver were living in exile and had established the international section of the Black Panther Party in September 1970. The gay nationalists also equated their separatist strategy to the struggles of Native Americans, comparing the Alpine project to the 19-month American Indian occupation of Alcatraz Island (Hobson, 2016: 34-38).

During these years, the Zionist movement became an important frame of reference for both black and gay nationalists. Leaders of the Black Freedom Movement, including W. E. B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. — as well as some Panthers leaders like Eldridge Cleaver in the early days of the Party — identified with the politics of Zionism (Lubin, 2016). A similar admiration for the Zionist movement can be found, for example, in the work of gay liberationist William S. Burroughs. In one interview, he asserted that ‘since we’ve been forced into the same position as Jews perhaps we should enact the same strategy,’ that is, ‘we should try to get our own state like Israel’ (Leyland, 1978: 22-23). A sovereign nation, the gay nationalists believed, would redeem a history of persecution and the lack of a safe and habitable geographical base. The possibility of freedom was therefore located in nationhood: the oppression of gays and lesbians would be resolved through the nation-state form.

The same ethnic model of homosexual identity that underpinned the assimilationist approach also formed the basis of the separatist strategy to establish ‘a completely autonomous gay nation’ (*Berkeley Tribe*, 1970: 20). The imaginary of a ‘gay nation’ as the endpoint of the gay liberation movement relied on the construction of a transhistorically stable cultural community of lesbians and gays. The gay nationalists had no doubts about their ability to identify the members of its ‘gay nation,’ nor were they troubled by the possibility of internal antagonisms or difference undercutting the presumed unity of its members. The notion of a gay voting majority bloc presumed unitary interests and political consensus amongst its members, grounded either in shared biological characteristics and/or a common ‘gay culture.’ It was also this conception of homosexuality as an ethnic group that enabled the gay nationalists to treat the Alpine project as wholly analogous to the movements of other ‘minority groups,’ such as African and Native Americans. Whilst the gay assimilationists conceived of

justice in terms of inclusion within the legal and political structures of the existing US nation-state, the gay nationalists sought to attain justice through the establishment of a new nation via territorial occupation. Both of these nationalist strategies employed an essentialist model of homosexuality which posited lesbians and gays as a unitary minority group with fixed and pre-determined interests.

The controversy surrounding the Alpine project solidified a schism within the Gay Liberation Front between nationalists and internationalists. As Hobson (2016: 12) argues: ‘Although this “colonization” project was never carried out, it had a lasting effect because it prompted gay leftists to argue that such colonization would replicate structures of capitalism, imperialism, and the “gay ghetto” itself.’ The activist Mother Boats condemned the Stonewall Colony, objecting that ‘Alpine County belongs to the 298 Washoe Indians’ and rebuking the Alpine project leaders for omitting these residents from the planning process (*Berkeley Barb*, 1970: 9), and the GLF chapters in Berkeley, New York, and Detroit denounced the project (Leighton, 2019: 869). Leo Laurence (1970: 12) added his voice to the opposition: ‘Alpine County is akin to the separatist movement of the black nationalists that Bobby Seale condemns in *Seize the Time*.’ The debate therefore re-energized the gay liberationist critique of separatist nationalism and reaffirmed their anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist horizons. The final section of this chapter turns to the internationalist strand of the gay liberation movement, which crystallized in opposition to the nationalism of both the gay assimilationists and the gay separatists, and upheld the anti-imperialist foundations of gay liberationism.

### Gay internationalism

The ethnic model of homosexuality that underpinned the rise of gay nationalisms in the early seventies can be contrasted to a political conception of homosexuality, articulated by the internationalist strand of the gay liberation movement. Gay revolutionaries like Mario Mieli in Italy, Dennis Altman in Australia, David Fernbach in Britain, Guy Hocquenghem in France, and Allen Young in the US envisioned homosexuality as a structural position constituted in relation to global systems of oppression, and conceptualized ‘gayness’ as a political stance that was forged through the

fight against those systems. This political account of homosexuality eschewed essentialisms, developed a frame for understanding the causes of domination as common to all oppressed people, and installed solidarity with revolutionary movements across the globe at the heart of sexual liberation. It hence formed the basis for an internationalist gay politics. The risks and limitations of this internationalism were laid bare again and again, however, as the gay liberationists' support for their comrades in anti-imperialist, anti-war, and other New Left struggles remained unreciprocated for fear of 'guilt by association.' In short, gay internationalism proved a fragile endeavor. Nowhere was it tested more than in the movement's relationship to the Cuban revolution. Gay internationalism was developed, tested, and ultimately reaffirmed through the transnational activities of the gay liberation movement in Cuba.

### *Articulating a political conception of homosexuality*

Within the post-war era, clinical psychoanalytic discourse on homosexuality shifted from a diagnosis of instincts and intrapsychic dynamics to a wider focus on interpersonal relations (of which family environments were the chief culprit) as the determinants of sexual deviancy (Floyd, 2009: 128). The moralizing and deeply conservative direction taken by the clinical psychoanalytic establishment dovetailed with the state's representation of homosexuals as vulnerable, maladjusted individuals that were particularly susceptible to the influence of communism. Both communism and homosexuality were figured as stealthy, metastasizing, pervasive threats to state power. This state discourse, Kevin Floyd (ibid.: 131) writes, 'paradoxically and ineluctably partook of a universalizing logic whereby homosexuality, like communism itself, constituted a potent uncontainable force fundamentally subversive of the nation as such.' This universalizing logic was largely embraced and repeated, rather than undermined, within the intellectual publications of gay liberationism. The most comprehensive and sophisticated theoretical elaborations of gay liberationism were Dennis Altman's *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* and Mario Mieli's *Towards a Gay Communism: Elements of a Homosexual Critique*, as well as Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*, arguably the text with the single most profound influence on gay liberationist ideology.

In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse attempts to radicalize Freud by inverting his narrative of the individual's maturation from an infantile polymorphous sexuality. This internal process of sexual development was, in Freud's view, demanded by progress. Marcuse (1966) responded that, firstly, these demands of progress were not transhistorical, but rather the historically produced needs of bourgeois, instrumental progress under advanced capitalism. Secondly, he argued that bourgeois 'progress,' prosperity, and productivity were orchestrating ever-greater destruction, immiseration, and repression. What was required, then, was 'a reversal in the direction of progress' (ibid.: xiv). This entailed overturning the commodification of the body and of libidinal pleasure. Marcuse's contention was that liberation would be achieved through the fight for what he referred to as 'Eros' — that is, a 'polymorphous sexuality' that was repressed under advanced capitalism, yet could be activated by making 'the human body an instrument of pleasure rather than labor' (ibid.: xv). In other words, Marcuse found immanent possibilities for the supersession of capitalism in the organized fight against the domestication and repression of human sexuality's essentially polymorphous nature. This utopian radicalization of Freud's work naturally appealed to the gay liberationists, especially as they refused to accept minoritizing definitions of homosexuality or to treat homosexuality as reconcilable with the existing social order. Indeed, Floyd (2009: 147) has characterized the gay liberation movement's purpose as, in part, 'to negotiate Marcuse's influence, to translate the speculative into the practical.'

The Marcusean notion of polymorphous sexuality as a liberating force suffuses the theoretical texts of the gay liberation movement. Dennis Altman's programmatic statement of gay liberationism in the 1971 text *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* appropriated Marcuse's analysis for the movement. Altman (2012: xi) was an Australian political scientist who became part of the emerging US gay liberation movement during his brief stay in New York City in the early seventies, where he worked for *Come Out!* magazine. Marcuse reminds us, Altman (1971: 84) writes, 'that any theory of sexual liberation needs to take into account the essentially polymorphous and bisexual needs of the human being.' Altman uses the term *bisexual* here not to refer to an identity category, but rather to a universal desire which has been repressed 'in the interests of economic development' (ibid.: 87). For Altman (ibid.: 89), it is 'the historical function of the homosexual to overcome' the repression of the

soul's inherent bisexuality through the eroticization of all areas of life (ibid.: 89). Significantly, Altman's (ibid.: 103-04) politically charged interpretation of Marcuse advocates an expansive view of liberation: it not only 'implies a return to original sexuality,' but also demands a concern 'with the nature of Western capitalism, imperialism, consumerism, bureaucracy etc.' These themes are also central to Mario Mieli's 1977 book, *Towards a Gay Communism*. Mieli was an Italian activist who partook in the London Gay Liberation Front as a student in 1971. Crucial to his political formation was also the Italian-based liberation group *Fuori!* (Mieli, 1977: xvi). He, too, insisted on the polymorphous perversity of human sexuality, 'negated by capitalist-heterosexual ideology' and subjected 'to alienated labor' (ibid.: xxxvii-xxxviii). In a characteristic inversion of clinical psychoanalytic discourse, Mieli (ibid.: 22) writes: 'What is pathological and pathogenic is not homoeroticism, but rather its persecution.' He contends in even more brazen terms than Altman that liberation entails 'the collapse of the capitalist system, which rests on the masculinist and heterosexual foundation of society and on the repression and exploitation of Eros that together guarantee the perpetuation of alienated labor and hence the rule of capital' (ibid.: 255).

Both of these accounts refuse the minoritization of gayness. The notion of an innate polymorphous perversity re-figured gayness as a universal desire that was present within everyone. Writes Mieli (ibid.: 6): 'In actual fact, latent homosexuality exists in everyone who is not a manifest homosexual, as a residue of infantile sexuality, polymorphous and "perverse", and hence also gay.' Alternatively, consider Altman's (1971: 79) formulation that 'unlike other minorities, we lie within the oppressor himself.' The universalization of gay desire takes these authors beyond the coordinates of identity, since it indexes a liberation from the constraining identity categories 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual' altogether. Mieli (1977: 254) contends that the 'antithesis of heterosexuality and homosexuality will be overcome' through the '(re)conquest of Eros,' and Altman (1971: 110) states that '[w]ith liberation, homosexuality and heterosexuality would cease to be viewed as separate conditions.' The abolition of gendered and sexual categories through the liberation of Eros implied nothing less than the birth of a new consciousness, of a new human. This emancipatory horizon was shared by gay and lesbian activists across North America, Britain, continental Europe, and Australasia

(Altman, 1993: 5-6), and was echoed within the manifestoes, pamphlets, and magazines of the period. Even the liberationist groups that were more reluctant to ground their analysis in the notion of a universal desire or Eros — most notably the Marxists in the movement — embraced these utopian ambitions. The socialist Red Butterfly collective, for instance, regarded liberation as the advent of ‘a *labelless* society — one that will be free of the stereotypes that divide man from man’ (*Come Out!*, 1970a: 4). Similarly, the Gay Revolution Party (1970: 344) defined gay revolution as the movement to ‘produce a world in which all social and sensual relationships will be gay and in which homo- and heterosexuality will be incomprehensible terms.’ It is within this context that we must understand the famous liberationist slogan ‘Gay Is Good,’ which was formulated by GLF-NY member Martha Shelley (1969: 34).

The gay liberationists used the notion of a polymorphous human nature as a normative basis on which to assail capitalist society. Their argument that the elimination of the distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality would require ‘the liberation of the total human being’ (*Rat*, 1969: 7) designated a conscious *negation* of social and cultural givens. The term ‘gay’ was therefore not the expression of a fixed cultural status or the identification with a sexual orientation, but rather denoted the subversion of the existing order of things. As such, it mounted a challenge to the very powers that confer legibility. The liberationist position should be read as *anti-essentialist* in its insistence on the socially and historically produced character of sexual typologies and on the desirability of their transcendence. As the GLF activist Allen Young (1972a: 28) declared: ‘Gay, in its most far-reaching sense, means not homosexual, but sexually free.’ This quote illustrates that the liberationists did not seek to recover a past sexual nature or lifestyle. The term ‘gay’ carried a decidedly future orientated quality, invoking a utopian society where the repression of gay desire had been overcome. José E. Muñoz therefore cautions against a reading of the plural ‘we’ in gay liberationist manifestoes as signifying a fixed, identifiable minority group. The ‘we,’ Muñoz (2019: 20) argues, ‘does not speak to a merely identitarian logic but instead to a logic of futurity.’ To read the term ‘gay’ as the marker of a stable sexual identity is anachronistic and displaces its performative component.

Taking the *political* dimension of the term ‘gay,’ as articulated by the gay internationalists, seriously has significant implications for how we understand various aspects of gay liberation history. Consider the centrality of ‘coming out’ to the movement’s political strategy. Theorists have critiqued this tactic for its essentialism. Steven Seidman (1998: 178), for instance, writes: ‘The dominant discourses of Stonewall culture framed the closet in a way that assumes an already formed homosexual self.’ Seidman argues that, for the liberationists, the closet served as a metaphor for the repression and concealment of an authentic, true homosexual desire. In his view, the closet should be rethought instead as a condition where a sense of ‘true’ self around homosexuality is produced, not repressed, and cultivated, not concealed. Jeffrey Escoffier (1998: 16) has similarly characterized the emphasis on coming out as rooted in an ‘ethic of authenticity,’ which formed new social norms of conduct. These critiques, however, obscure the extent to which liberationists considered ‘gay’ to be a political stance. If ‘gay’ implied a challenge to ‘the very definitions and demarcations that society has created’ (Altman, 1971: 244) — and therefore involved a transformation of consciousness that would supplant the mindset of identity altogether — then ‘coming out’ is more accurately understood as a *politicization* of homosexuality than as an *essentialization* of homosexuality. This crucial distinction is illustrated in popular liberationist slogans, such as ‘Out of the Closets and into the Streets’ or ‘Coming Out Against the War.’ The latter underscores the centrality of the Vietnam War and the US anti-war movement to the politicization of homosexuality of the late sixties and early seventies. Since the claim to homosexuality could be used as a tactic to avoid the draft, it was within the context of mass anti-war protests that countless homosexual men ‘came out.’ Justin David Suran has therefore argued that the experience of finding a political voice often could not be disentangled from the process of assuming a gay identity. Suran (2001: 463) writes: ‘Adopting a gay identity in 1969 meant more than simply affirming one’s same-sex orientation by declaring oneself “a homosexual”; it meant positioning oneself in relation to a clearly articulated set of commitments and ideals associated at the time with radical politics.’ Furthermore, the logistical difficulties involved in proving one’s homosexuality to the draft board threw the absence of clear, standard criteria to define who counts as ‘a homosexual’ into sharp relief (ibid.: 461-62). R. Kincaid (1975: 11) specifies this constitutive link between the politicization



and consolidation of gay identity in his essay ‘Coming Out Politically,’ published in the British socialist journal *Gay Left*, where he defines the strategy of coming out as ‘a process of “becoming” [that] involves us in dispersing this fog of false consciousness.’

Mario Mieli (1977: 39) was clear about his intentions. As liberationists, he maintained, ‘far more than the “origin” of our homosexuality, we are concerned to investigate and shed light on the motives for its persecution.’ The liberationists endeavored to illuminate the forces that repressed homosexuality, rather than discover its origins or ascertain its truth. Homosexuality was thus conceived as a social position produced in a constitutive relation to the totalizing systems of sexism, imperialism, and capitalism. We might say, then, that for the gay internationalists *homosexuality* named a *structural relation* to oppressive institutions (such as the nuclear family, education, the law, and private property), and *gay* named a shared *political consciousness* forged through the fight against those institutions. The institution that these liberationists considered most directly linked to the production and oppression of the homosexual was the private nuclear household. In 1973, David Fernbach (1973: 149) published an influential essay in the British journal *Gay Marxist*, entitled ‘Towards a Marxist Theory of Gay Liberation,’ in which he argued that the nuclear family was ‘the determined product of capitalist relations of production,’ since it became the mechanism through which the working class could most conveniently reproduce itself. As the site where the ‘structures of masculinity and femininity’ were reproduced, the nuclear family also lay at the root of the sexual patterning of our society (ibid.: 151). The Gay Liberation Front, Fernbach (ibid.: 157) concludes, therefore ‘correctly perceived [the family] as the basis of gay oppression.’ This view was shared by various liberationist groups. In the US, Third World Gay Revolution (1971: 365) stated in their manifesto: ‘We believe that the bourgeois nuclear family perpetuates the false categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality by creating sex roles, sex definitions and sexual exploitation.’ And at the 1970 Revolutionary People’s Constitutional Convention, organized by the Black Panther Party in Philadelphia, one of the demands of the Male Homosexual Workshop (1970: 403) read: ‘The abolition of the nuclear family because it perpetuates the false categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality.’

It should be noted that the term ‘homophobia’ was not yet in use at the time. Instead, liberationists commonly described the repression, discrimination, and persecution of homosexuals as a facet of *sexist* oppression. The following quotations illustrate how sexism became the common frame within which these various elements of gay liberationist ideology — the conceptualization of ‘homosexuality’ as a social relation, the universalization of ‘gay,’ and the political horizon of a labelless society — were united into a coherent whole:

The artificial categories ‘heterosexual’ and ‘homosexual’ have been laid on us by a sexist society. [...] Straights who are threatened by us like to accuse us of separatism — but our understanding of sexism is premised on the idea that in a free society everyone will be gay.

(Young, 1972a: 28-29)

[L]esbianism, like male homosexuality, is a category of behavior possible only in a sexist society characterized by rigid sex roles and dominated by male supremacy. [...] In a society in which men do not oppress women, and sexual expression is allowed to follow feelings, the categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality would disappear.

(Radicalesbians, 1970: 172-73)

The secondary status of women and the oppression of homosexual women and men stem from a common source: the sexism that is basic to a capitalist society. [...] The myths used to persecute lesbians are extensions of those that oppress all women.

(Williams, 1973: 112)

Gay revolution will see the overthrow of the straight male caste and the destruction of all systems of caste and class that are based in sexism. It is on this point that gay revolution differs from past revolutions of the proletariat and Third World: it is complete revolution.

(Gay Revolution Party, 1970: 344)

### *Solidarity at its limits*

Solidarity was fundamental to this political account of homosexuality. An end to sexual and gendered categories and norms could only be achieved, the gay liberationists believed, through a total restructuring of the socio-political order of which sexual liberation was one necessary part. Since this entailed a multi-sited struggle against the global systems of domination— imperialism, capitalism, sexism — that were common to all oppressed people, sexual liberation would only be won through connections with other anti-systemic struggles. As the Third World Gay Revolution (1971: 363-64) manifesto stated: ‘We each organize our people about different issues, but our struggles are the same against oppression, and we will defeat it together. [...] The struggles of the peoples of the world are our fight as well; their victories are our victories and our victories are theirs. Our freedom will come only with their freedom.’ Steve Valocchi (1999: 69) notes that the view that all oppression was rooted in the same institutions and social systems, and that the fates of oppressed groups everywhere were therefore inextricably linked, ‘stood in dynamic tension with the idea [...] that gay people are a minority group and, like other minority groups, should use the government and the courts to gain equal rights’ or, I would add, establish a separate territorial base from where to self-govern. The belief in the inseparability of political struggles was linked to the gay internationalists’ refusal to minoritize homosexuality. Martha Shelley (1969: 34) captures this link when she writes: ‘As long as you divide yourselves, we will be divided from you [...] You will never be rid of us, because we reproduce ourselves out of your bodies – and out of your minds. We are one with you.’ The divisions between oppressed groups, on this account, stemmed from the categories that sexism imposed on people and that would be undone through revolutionary unity.

The gay liberationists acknowledged that the cause of sexual liberation had been at best ignored by previous revolutionary movements. They argued that revolution was compromised to the extent that the battle against sexism was absent from it. The Male Homosexual Workshop (1970: 402) declared at the RPCC that ‘[s]exism prevents the revolutionary solidarity of the people,’ and the Red

Butterfly collective asserted that ‘the struggle for sexual liberation is a necessary part of making the Revolution by any means necessary’ (*Come Out!*, 1970a: 4). The persistence of sexism within radical movements, including the gay liberation movement itself, was therefore considered the final bulwark against the integral alignment of oppressed people. The activist Sandy Blixton (1972: 324) explained that ‘instead of sisters and brothers coming together in a mass-based force against the oppression, they remain conditioned and now even co-opted by sexist forces and shy away from the Left — those people committed in theory and practice to total revolution.’ These statements attest to the marginalization, stigmatization, and discrimination that gays and lesbians experienced within the broader New Left, at the same time that they were pronouncing their inseparability from those other insurrectionary movements. This contradiction produced a series of challenges for the gay internationalists.

During the Stonewall rebellion, Jim Fouratt made phone calls to his straight comrades to tell them that people were rioting against the police ‘just like Newark’ and urged them to lend support, yet none of them appeared (Duberman, 2019: 245). Karla Jay tried to elicit a gesture of support from her straight radical feminist friends at Redstockings, but was similarly met with silence and inaction (ibid.: 256). Jim, Karla, and many others learned early on that the gay liberation movement could not expect the same backing for their cause that they had offered others. This asymmetry was especially visible in the fraught encounter between gay liberationism and the black liberation movement, experienced acutely by black gay activists like Bayard Rustin and James Baldwin who were marginalized by the sexual politics of the black liberation movement. The same figures that inspired gay radicals with their revolutionary charisma also promulgated extreme anti-gay views. Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver both vocally renounced homosexuality and advanced a problematic conception of black masculinity and heterosexuality (Mumford, 2016). In his immensely popular book *Soul of Ice*, Cleaver (1968: 136) wrote: ‘Homosexuality is a sickness, just as are baby-rape or wanting to be head of General Motors.’

Within the Black Panther Party, words like ‘faggot’ and ‘sissy’ were frequently used to smear not only lesbian and gay activists but also cops, capitalists, and politicians (Leighton, 2019: 861). So-called ‘faggot-baiting’ was used to establish revolutionary credentials for oneself and delegitimize political opponents (Kissack, 1995: 111-12). This highly charged tactic was one of the central reasons

that the relations between gay and black radicals became increasingly strained. As Martha Shelley (1969: 31) declared in her famous essay ‘Gay Is Good:’ ‘We’re sick of the Panthers lumping us together with the capitalists in their term of universal contempt — “faggot.”’ Many of the most avid gay supporters of the Panthers became gradually alienated from the Black Panther Party. Jim Fouratt, for instance, had initially defended Cleaver’s anti-gay statements and adopted the Panthers’ rhetoric of masculine strength and feminine passivity, contrasting his own radical militancy to the timid and submissive politics of ‘emasculated queens’ (Kissack, 1995: 111). At a rally in May 1970, however, Jim decided to openly criticize the Black Panther Party, and later admitted that he would forever regret coming to the defense of the Black Power leaders (Duberman, 2019: 317-18).<sup>6</sup> Leo Laurence was another leading figure within the gay liberation movement who distanced himself from the Panthers over time. In an essay for the *Berkeley Barb* in late 1970, Laurence (1970: 8) wrote that he expected ‘more than revolutionary rhetoric from the “vanguard,”’ adding that that Huey Newton’s speeches rarely mention the gay liberation movement and that ‘it’s still tough for a black homosexual to be a Panther.’ Indeed, lesbian and gay Panthers faced considerable hostility within the Party, including physical violence (Leighton, 2019: 870). Laurence’s essay concludes with the following statement:

[D]on’t the people of the ‘Third World’ understand that their revolution WON’T be total unless homosexuals are liberated along with other minorities? Homosexual liberation is NOT a part of the DAILY consciousness of people in Babylon today. That must change! Gay-Lib must become part of the everyday political and tactical strategy of our revolutionary leadership, the ‘vanguard’, if they mean business by TOTAL revolution.

(Laurence, 1970: 12)

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<sup>6</sup> In early 1970, Jim Fouratt (1970: 15) had excused the Panthers’ use of faggot-baiting in an essay for *Come Out!* in the following terms: ‘It is claimed that [the Panthers and the Yippies] are all outspokenly anti-homosexual. And most of it revolves around the word faggot. Cleaver used the word repeatedly in the most pejorative manner in SOUL ON ICE, and it has become a standard part of white and black Panther rhetoric. The problem is that my brothers and sisters don’t understand the word faggot as Cleaver and many blacks use it. The word faggot is used to describe any castrated male made impotent by the society. The black man has traditionally been castrated by white society by its refusal to allow him the dignity of meaningful work.’

Women within the gay liberation movement were doubly estranged from the Black Panther Party's gendered language of resistance and sexualized codes of masculinity and femininity. The antagonism between lesbian feminists and black radicals became a highly public matter at the BPP's 1970 Revolutionary People's Constitution Convention in Philadelphia. The experience of the multi-racial Male Homosexual Workshop stood in contrast to that of the predominantly white Lesbian Workshop, led by the NY Radicalesbians (Hobson, 2016: 33). The women in this contingent found that one of their workshops had been canceled and that their speaker had been denied access. They decided to walk out of the conference, issuing sharp critiques of their treatment and ultimately breaking ties with the Black Panther Party (Leighton, 2019: 872). The lesbian activists concluded in the pages of *Come Out!* (1970b: 17): 'Speaking from our guts, from the depth of our oppression, we say that the Black Panthers are sexist; that the Black Panther Party, supposedly our brothers in revolution, oppresses us is a doubly painful thing. But we will take no one's shit.' The New York lesbians also encountered opposition from the women's movement. Eager to distance the movement from the taint of homosexuality, Betty Friedan famously spoke of a 'lavender menace' within the movement and participated in purges of lesbians from the National Organization of Women (Kissack, 1995: 112).

The difficulties of working with groups like the Panthers, who many gay liberationists had championed uncritically at first, exposed the striking mismatch between the ideology of the gay and lesbian radicals and their organizing experiences. The rejection of the minoritization of gayness stemmed from a deep-seated conviction that oppressed groups shared common enemies, that their fates were intertwined, and that past revolutions had failed because the persistence of sexism had undermined the unity of the people. However, the attempt to liberate oppressed people from the divisive categories of 'heterosexuality' and 'homosexuality' also threatened to undermine the autonomy of the gay and lesbian movement. Allen Young was one prominent GLF member who was adamant that sexual liberation could only be achieved through standing in solidarity with groups like the Panthers, yet also believed that the gay liberationists must resist their anti-gay politics. Young (1972a:

24) explained his conflicted feelings about his straight comrades thus: ‘We do have a common enemy in US imperialism; that is true and that provides us with a certain sense of unity. But the straight movement has continually asked gay people to deny the validity of the gay struggle.’ Similarly, for Karla Jay, unquestioned support for other radical groups risked dissolving into ‘*self-denying apologetics*’ (Duberman, 2019: 308).

In short, the gay liberationists were soon confronted with an unsettling contradiction. On the one hand, they held that true liberation could only be won through the radical unity of all oppressed groups. This would be evidenced by the withering away of constraining gender and sexual categories. On the other hand, in practice, the desired *liberation from* sexual divisions often devolved into a *denial of* sexual oppression. That is, appeals to unity and collectivity functioned as a cover for the continued renunciation of gender and sexual causes. As the gay liberationists fought against the fracturing and policing of social movements’ constitutive entanglement, they began to realize that this solidarity-building effort was, more often than not, unidirectional and unreciprocated. In the fall of 1970, GLF-San Francisco asked the Black Panther Party for assistance in a dispute with a landlord who was threatening to remove its members from a commune (Leighton, 2019: 867). When their requests were disregarded, Jared Leighton (*ibid.*: 868) relates, the GLF member Roger Green reminded the Panthers of a vigil that the GLF had held ‘when the Oakland headquarters [...] was threatened with a raid, adding, “We put our bodies on the line. Had the pigs come shooting, it might have been our lives.”’ This asymmetrical relationship between the gay liberationists and their putative comrades became a matter of intense debate in the context of transnational organizing with the Cuban state. The limits of solidarity were put to the test when the so-called Venceremos Brigades brought the political ambitions of the gay liberation movement, the New Left, and the Cuban revolutionary regime together.

### ***Forging transnational connections: The gay liberationists go to Cuba***

In January 1968, the anarcho-communist writer Daniel Guérin attended the tricontinental Havana Cultural Congress in Cuba. Known to militant queers as ‘the grandfather of French gay liberation’ (Frost, 2021: 38), Guérin built a broad constellation of anti-imperialist solidarities over his lifetime through his friendships with black liberation activists and Caribbean intellectuals like C.L.R. James and Aimé Césaire. His attraction to France’s Front Homosexuel d’Action Révolutionnaire (FHAR), Jacqueline Frost (*ibid.*: 44) has suggested, followed directly from the influence of anti-imperialist politics on the gay liberation movement’s organizational structure and ideological coordinates. The Cuban Revolution was a particularly important reference point for FHAR members. As Guérin sought to elaborate solidarities across the two movements, he found that his admiration for the Cuban revolution would interact in complex ways with his sexual politics. Thinking anti-imperialism and sexual liberation together was a difficult task in the context of Cuba’s persecution of homosexuals. Notably, Cuban state repression did not lead Guérin to abandon his commitment to anti-imperialist projects. Instead, many of his writings from the seventies included powerful denunciations of Cuban state repression through the language of anti-imperialism. Guérin’s concept of ‘anti-homosexual racism,’ which applied Frantz Fanon’s analysis of colonialism as a psychosocial form of oppression to the systemic violence against those who display non-normative sexualities, indexed his refusal to cede the ground of anti-imperialism to the Cuban revolutionaries (*ibid.*: 10). Guérin’s work shows that, if he was initially drawn to the politics of sexual liberation through his commitment to anti-colonial process in the Third World, his connection to sexual liberation in turn became a central case in the remaking, refinement, and indeed entrenchment of his anti-imperialist political imaginary. This brief sketch of Guérin’s political life can serve as a portal into the historical aspirations and trajectory of gay internationalism.

Cuba also held a central position in the story of the US gay liberation movement, as the site of a difficult negotiation between anti-imperialist politics and the demands of sexual liberation. In 1969, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) mobilized hundreds of left-wing US activists to travel to Cuba, in violation of the travel embargo, where they contributed their labor to the new Communist state by cutting and harvesting sugarcane and gained direct experience of Cuban society and culture



(Lekus, 2004: 57). Several gay and lesbian internationalists embarked upon these illegal trips, called the Venceremos Brigades. In Cuba, they distributed gay liberationist material and met with other visitors from Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Brazil, and Bolivia (Galvin, 1970: 19). The activist Allen Young joined the first tour prior to coming out and only five months before the Stonewall riots. He returned deeply disturbed by his discoveries about the government's historical internment of homosexuals in work camps, as well as the ongoing persecution, ghettoization, and abuse of homosexuals and the prevalent anti-gay sentiment amongst his fellow *brigadistas* (Young, 1972b: 209-10). A year later, Young participated in a forum between the Gay Liberation Front and the *brigadistas* who had returned from the second Venceremos Brigade. Tensions began to arise between the two groups, as the gay liberationists grew impatient with their comrades' silence on the Cuban government's anti-homosexual activities, and erupted in a hostile confrontation in the summer of 1970 when NYC's Elgin Theater accidentally double-booked two benefit showings, one for the Venceremos Brigade and one for a Stonewall commemoration. When GLF members refused to cancel their event, they were verbally attacked and physically threatened by the *brigadistas*. This confrontation led to the formation of the Flaming Faggots collective (Kissack, 1995: 124).

In the following discussions between the Front members and Brigade leadership, several GLF activists decided to join the third contingent to Cuba. However, Jim Fouratt, who had helped to organize the first Venceremos Brigade, was prohibited from joining the third contingent because the committee decided that his ambition to organize gays and lesbians there would antagonize their Cuban comrades (Duberman, 2019: 295). On the third trip, the gay and lesbian *brigadistas* were harassed and intimidated, and soon after the National Committee of the Venceremos Brigade issued a new recruitment policy that banned any lesbians and gays from participation unless they agreed to remain silent about their sexuality (Lekus, 2004: 60). There was a concerted effort on behalf of Cuban officials and the brigade organizers to remove all gay liberation activists from future contingents, leading to a rapid deterioration of relations between the Venceremos Brigade and the GLF. These conflicts also inflamed irreparable political divisions within the Liberation News Service (LNS). The organization was banned from attending a journalism conference in Havana after deciding to distribute a letter

written by an anonymous group of gay Cubans that expressed criticism of the Cuban government's treatment of homosexuals. Despite their sympathetic stance toward gay liberation, the LNS stopped short of challenging fundamental aspects of the Cuban revolution. Allen Young, who Slonecker (2012: 112) has referred to as 'the driving force behind LNS internationalism,' did not relent in his reproof of the collective. Ian Keith Lekus (2004: 77) has argued that, over the course of the Brigades, 'the GLF *brigadistas* practiced their own form of foreign policy.' The poet Allen Ginsberg would later affirm that 'the confrontation with the repressive, conservative bureaucracy in Cuba [...] was one of the most useful things that gay lib did on an international scale' (Young, 1981: 23).

How did the Cuban state frame homosexuality? The gay and lesbian *brigadistas* were continuously represented as agents of a corrosive, imperialist project to impose Western homosexuality upon Cuban society. The Cuban state adopted its theories of homosexuality both from the Freudian model that probed its origins in psychological pathology, and from the Stalinist model that characterized it as an eradicable symptom of capitalism, decadence, and idleness. Homosexuality was also regarded as incompatible with the militant image of manhood that was promoted as key to the successful fight against imperialism (Lekus, 2004: 73) and against the social vices of prostitution, gambling, and drugs (Young, 1972b: 213-14). In its official statement banning self-avowed lesbians and gays from participation in the Venceremos Brigades, the National Committee referred to gay liberation as 'a cultural imperialist offensive against the Cuban Revolution' that was 'imposing North American gay culture on the Cubans (for example, parading in drag in a Cuban town, acting in an overtly sexual manner at parties)' (Venceremos Brigade, 1972: 411). The policy defined homosexuality as 'a social pathology which reflects left-over bourgeois decadence and has no place in the formation of the New Man which Cuba is building' (ibid.). Exemptions from the ban would only be made for those who were intent on 'respecting Cuban culture' — that is, remaining silent about their homosexuality (ibid.: 412). The document relied on a strict demarcation between Cuban national revolutionary culture and American imperialist capitalist culture. The Venceremos Brigade (ibid.: 411) maintained: 'This position was formulated by the Cuban people for the Cuban people. It was not formulated for the US, or any other country. Cuba is for Cubans.' Many of the narratives found within Cuban state discourse

were repeated by the liberationists' fellow New Left *brigadistas*, for whom homosexuality 'represented either bourgeois decadence, a vestige of capitalism that required eradication, or a joke worthy of derision, dismissal, and harassment' (Lekus, 2004: 60). Members of the Third World caucus condemned homosexuality as a 'white man's disease' (Alternate U Forum, 1970: 235).

The confrontation with straight New Left and Cuban 'comrades' was a harrowing experience for the gay liberationists, for whom Cuba had represented a revolutionary utopia. As Allen Young (1972b: 207) reflects: 'For young Americans such as myself, Cuba, 90 miles from home, provided the first and the clearest example of a people fighting with considerable unity against US imperialism. [...] It didn't take long for me to feel a deep love, an emotional as well as intellectual commitment, to the people of Cuba.' These romantic notions were dealt a heavy blow by the virulent anti-gay attacks that the gay liberationists faced during the trips. The long and uncomfortably intimate boat rides to Cuba, as well as the crowded work camps on the island, were beset with conflict. Gay men were physically attacked in their beds and had their mosquito nets sliced (Lekus, 2004: 67). One gay *brigadista* reported that he 'was ready to kill' his fellow *brigadistas* who would yell that 'there's homosexuals trying to get into my bed' or that they needed 'some homosexual repellent' (Alternate U Forum, 1970: 232). Another gay activist was told that 'the most revolutionary thing' he could do was to confront his homosexuality 'and become a man' (ibid.: 235). Allen Young (1996: 29) recalled these painful memories years later: 'In Cuba, I discovered [...] that the revolution I loved so dearly was built on lies, repression and tyranny.'

The Venceremos Brigade demonstrated once more that gay and lesbian radicals were expected to sacrifice both their personal integrity and their commitment to the politics of sexual liberation in order to be welcomed within Left struggles. If comrades expressed support for the gay liberation movement, one gay *brigadista* explained, it was due to its opposition to 'the United States government and its imperialist policies' rather than to 'the oppression of homosexuals' (Alternate U Forum, 1970: 238-39). A dual commitment to the Cuban revolution and the gay liberation movement proved untenable, but the gay and lesbian rebels refused to regard these positions as contradictory. Their experiences in the cramped boats, buses, and camps provided an opportunity for the gay liberationists

to reaffirm the central tenets of their internationalist political framework. The separation of sexual politics from anti-imperialism was firmly rejected. Observing the pressure of gay liberationists to 'validate themselves' to their straight comrades 'by doing the proper amount of work for the anti-war movement,' Allen Young (1972b: 225) rejoined that '[w]ars are produced by straight men, and gay liberation *is* anti-war movement.' In short, the controversial Venceremos Brigades presented a stage on which the liberationists could negotiate how to best challenge the anti-gay attitudes of straight comrades without relinquishing their commitment to internationalism.

One debate about how gay liberationist politics should be reassessed in light of the events in Cuba took place between three leading voices in the pages of *The Detroit Liberator*. Martha Shelley (1970: 5) took the most uncompromising stance, deriding the gay and lesbian radicals for their servility and entreating them to stop fawning on faux revolutionaries: 'I'm not interested in proving my worth as a human being to any movement, state, church, party, or what have you. If the movement doesn't recognize my humanity, it isn't revolutionary. I'm not going to be patient — to wait, die for someone else's freedom, wait, crucify myself on the correct party line, wait — until the tenth generation before I can have my freedom.' Guy Nassburg responded critically to Martha Shelley. He agreed with the urgency of breaking the silence on the treatment of homosexuals on 'the macho, faggotbaiting womanhating trips of so-called straight radicals' to Cuba, yet held that gay liberationists had 'no other choice' but to be revolutionaries and claimed that Cubans were 'building communism for our benefit as homosexuals whether they know it or not' (Nassburg, 1970: 5-6). He concluded his essay by recommending that the GLF circulate a public letter criticizing the Cuban regime's treatment of homosexuality 'out of love for the Cuban people' (ibid.). A third perspective, written by Wayne Pierce, was published in a later issue of the journal. Pierce (1970: 4) dismissed the stark opposition drawn by Martha Shelley between 'our' and 'their' revolution, stating that he was 'unwilling to leave that revolution totally in the hands of the straights.' In Shelley's account, the accusation of oppression was not levered primarily against the Cuban state, but rather against the straight revolutionaries themselves. This view conceded the terrain of revolutionary struggle to straight radicals. Pierce (ibid.) was equally critical of Guy Nassburg's suggestion that it was possible to fight alongside the Cuban revolutionaries

without abandoning the cause of gay liberation. Instead of reproaching the Cuban leadership with formal statements, the role of the gay liberationists must be to ‘call upon our Cuban sisters and brothers to organize themselves to fight against their oppression’ (ibid.: 5). For Pierce, the debate was not a matter of building a Cuban society with better leaders, but rather one ‘where the power is really in the hands of the people’ (ibid.). Gay internationalism, as expressed by Pierce, combined the historical aspirations of sexual liberation and anti-imperialist revolution through the self-organization of the mass of the people. In other words, revolution would not be achieved by making the oppression of homosexuals visible to Cuban state elites in the hope that they would deem those homosexuals worthy of their consideration. There is, after all, no reason to expect that exposing anti-homosexual violence and persecution would necessarily produce a charitable response (rather than inspire further oppression, or no response at all). Revolutionary action would instead be achieved by recognizing the agency of Cuban gays and supporting their fight.

The debate within the pages of *The Detroit Liberator* is one example of how the experiences of the gay liberationists in Cuba enabled a crystallization of the movement’s internationalist position. Despite differences of opinion, it was gay liberation’s conception of homosexuality as a social relation, and of gayness as a form of political consciousness, that created possibilities for them to effectively oppose the Cuban state discourse. Rather than search for the ‘essence’ of Cuban homosexuality, the gay and lesbian *brigadistas* probed the structures that produced the conditions of homosexual life in Cuban society. In his political and sexual biographies, Allen Young (1981: 4-6) outlines the factors that were considered to be central to the constitution and control of homosexual life at the time. These included the centrality of the nuclear family as the basic unit of society; the prevalence of particular forms of sexism — machismo and male chauvinism — present within the Hispanic world; the consolidation and expansion of state power in the aftermath of the revolution, although persecution was less codified within the law than in North America and Western Europe; the ‘prerevolutionary status of Havana as a “sin city”’ due to the colonial restructuring of its economy around prostitution, gambling, and narcotics (ibid.: 9); and the adoption of Soviet theories of homosexuality (ibid.: 15-18). Similar explanatory accounts of the production of Cuban homosexuality in relation to

post-revolutionary structural adjustments and developments can be found in articles within various gay liberationist papers, including Keith Birch's (1975: 8-9) extensive investigation 'Gays in Cuba' in the British journal *Gay Left*. Whether or not the *content* of these analyses is convincing or plausible is secondary. What is notable, rather, is their *form*. The conceptualization of homosexuality as a *relation* to structures of power brackets the question of essences and sidesteps the need to establish a quasi-ethnic status for homosexuals.

Some discussions of homosexuality in Cuba showed an awareness of the historically and geopolitically varied constructions of same-sex desire. For instance, in his biographies Allen Young (1981: 25) explains that homosexuality in Cuba was defined in terms of sexual acts rather than sexual object choice, so that a man who performs an active role during sex is not considered 'a homosexual in the eyes of Cubans.' Nevertheless, the liberationists did not display much ambition to produce anthropological or phenomenological accounts of non-Western forms of same-sex desire and experience. They were more determined to discern the underlying forces which generate variegated sexual cultures. In other words, they refused to treat homosexuality as an ethnic minority status by positing its universal, pre-social essence. Instead, they sought to reveal how homosexuality was positioned in a categorical relation to various institutions, from the nuclear family to sex work — a contingent positioning that varied according to socio-political context.

Firmly rejecting the Cuban state's insistence on a local, revolutionary Cuban sexual culture that is endangered by the influences of gay and lesbian North American *brigadistas*, Allen Young (1981: 86) writes: 'For a regime that makes such a fuss about "cultural imperialism", [its] dependence on Eastern Europe for intellectual ideas and communication is contradictory and unfortunate.' The particular manifestation of homosexuality within Cuban society is constituted through international systems of power. On the one hand, he maintains that the policies of 'US government and business [...] cannot and should not bear the entire burden' or be used to silence critics of the Cuban state. On the other hand, he insists that the policies of the Cuban government cannot be properly understood as 'domestic' factors since 'centralized male-dominated governments ultimately have more in common with their ruling counterparts elsewhere' (ibid.: 90-91). Daniel Guérin similarly understood Cuban

sexual culture as the result of US imperialism, as it had ‘converted the island into a hedonistic playground for American tourists’ (Frost, 2021: 43). The Cuban revolution, in turn, attempted to repress and control populations associated with this hedonistic culture, including sex workers and homosexuals. The persecution of homosexuals in Cuba was therefore not an exception to state repression in Europe or North America; it, too, was an expression of the intensification and expansion of state powers ‘combined with regime autocracy and an increasingly Stalinist surveillance apparatus’ (ibid.: 44).

This discussion returns us to the liberationists’ representation of gayness as inseparable from the political consciousness that is forged through a collective struggle against the systems that repress and regulate (historically and culturally varied) conditions of homosexuality. Reflecting on his tour of Cuba, Young (1972b: 219) writes: ‘Some people, straight and gay, think that gayness is defined by what you do in bed, but my contact with Cuban gays taught me in myriad ways how gayness is shared experiences based on the uniqueness of gay love plus the struggle to resist the oppressions of a sexist society.’ This articulation of gayness as a political stance is present within the Gay Revolution Party’s response to a declaration by the Cuban National Congress on Education and Culture which outlined the state’s view of homosexuality as a pathology and deviation. The Gay Revolution Party (1971: 12) announced that ‘the creation of gayness,’ defined as ‘mutuality and equality of human relationships,’ was ‘inherent to the development of a true socialist society.’ Inversely, ‘the only way to ensure a straight Cuba is to re-establish capitalism’ (ibid.). In this response, the gay liberationists clarified that they were not fighting for the recognition of Cuban homosexuals as a minority group, or for their equality under the law. These positions would have required the liberationists to identify and naturalize a particular conception of homosexuality that could be recognized by the state and codified within juridical discourse. By refusing this injunction to minoritize gayness, they bypassed the essentialist trappings of the nationalist approaches. Instead, they affirmed that they were not ‘call[ing] upon any straight male government to change its policy or reform its laws, whether it is in Cuba, the United States, or the Soviet Union’ (ibid.). In a response to the same declaration, published in the newspaper *Fag Rag*, the Gay Committee of Returned Brigadistas (1971: 12) encapsulated it thus: ‘Gay people owe allegiance to

no nation.’ Gay internationalism was not a fight for nation-states to extend recognition and guarantee protection to an objective, empirical group of individuals called ‘homosexuals,’ or a fight for the consolidation of nationalist enclaves that gays and lesbians could flee to, but rather the struggle to achieve a total transformation of totalizing systems of power and their attendant regimes of sexual and gender intelligibility.

The Los Angeles Research Group, a group of self-avowed lesbian communist liberationists, wrote a pamphlet in 1975 that tackled widespread Communist proclamations on homosexuality. In a quotation worth citing at length, they counter the assertion that ‘gayness is a “response” either to decaying imperialism or male supremacy:’

[I]t is a mistake to focus on response and label it negative. Take for instance, the historical phenomena of capitalism and imperialism. Class struggle and wars of national liberation are ‘responses’ we support and participate in. Class collaboration is also a ‘response’; it is a response to be isolated and defeated. Thus it is insufficient to dismiss a phenomenon as a ‘response’ and as such to label it negative. What is key is the form it takes, whose class interests it advances.

(Los Angeles Research Group, 1975: 119-20)

In the above quotation, the lesbian liberationists argue that, if gayness is in fact a product of Western modernity, this need not be a regrettable admission. They equate gayness with other forms of revolutionary conflict, such as wars of national liberation and class struggle, which are also responses to international systems of oppression. In line with the LA Research Group’s argument, this section has shown that the gay and lesbian *brigadistas* were not attempting to impose their own sexual identification, behavior, or culture onto Cubans. In fact, they did not hold a purely ethnic conception of homosexual identity which they could have expected to discover in Cuba. The liberationists considered themselves united in a common struggle with their gay and lesbian Cuban comrades not *for* the establishment of a minority status, but rather *against* the systems of sexism, imperialism, and capitalism that are productive of gender and sexual categories altogether.



## Conclusion

Histories of the gay liberation movement, most frequently narrated through a narrow domestic frame, tend to be organized via a division between a radical and an assimilationist faction. In this account, the radical strand, represented by groups like the Gay Liberation Front and the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, is understood as a short-lived, utopian, and somewhat spontaneous outburst of political energies that was gradually sublimated into the reformist, rights-oriented assimilationist project of the Gay Activists Alliance. If the transnational dimensions of the gay liberation movement are mentioned in these historical accounts, they are often framed as mere reflections or side effects of domestic developments.

This chapter has shown that centering the transnational in our reading of this history tells a different story. First, it illuminates a fundamental schism within the gay liberation movement that is obscured by the assimilationism/radicalism dichotomy — namely, between the formation of a gay internationalism and the consolidation of gay nationalisms. Second, it illustrates how the arduous process of building a gay internationalism, both through globally circulated intellectual productions and transnational connections to Third World regimes, played a central role in shaping the broader trajectory of revolutionary formations of the sixties and seventies. The gay liberationists both contributed substantially to radical-left movements and incited generative conflict within them. Third, foregrounding the transnational dimension of the gay liberation movement also encourages us to re-examine the political frame of internationalism itself. The gay liberationists argued that the unity proffered by the internationalist Left forestalled sexual liberation. Their New Left comrades, they insisted, held a truncated vision of internationalism, and true liberation could therefore only be achieved by exposing the exclusions through which this unity was established and sustained. In short, this particular vantage point sheds light on the domesticating influence that the ‘straight’ internationalism of the New Left exerted on the gay liberation movement, thereby belying its own promise.

We should understand the gay liberationist critiques of Cuba's treatment of homosexuals not as a detraction from the elaboration of a revolutionary internationalism. In challenging the exclusions that shaped the contours of Cuban tricontinentalism and in installing sexual liberation as an integral component to the struggles against imperialist capitalism, they contributed to a reconfiguration of internationalism. They envisioned an internationally coordinated project of freedom that was truer to the revolutionary reinvention of social relations, since it aimed to shatter also the sexual and gender categories that were constituted through the long history of Western imperialism. This internationalist freedom struggle engendered new conceptions of sexual expression, identity, and liberation. Appropriating and inverting Freud's view of sexual development, the gay liberationists proposed that the social order was stabilized through a violent eradication of the 'polymorphous perversity' or 'pansexuality' of the human. This explained the oppression of sexual deviants, those who dared to explore the natural condition of bisexuality, and prescribed a solution: the unleashing of flamboyant displays of unrepressed sexuality and the eroticization of all spheres of life.

Ultimately, the terms of encounter between the gay liberationists and the Cuban revolutionaries — bound up in the broader Cold War context — were not conducive to their reconciliation or to a 'queer' renewal of the internationalist project. The historical conditions that might have rendered such comradely critique possible were not in place. Gay internationalism was curtailed in the forward march of gay and lesbian history. However, the gay liberationist vision did not fully disintegrate over the course of the seventies. An incipient black lesbian feminist movement adopted and expanded the sixties project of sexual liberation.

## II. Politicizing difference: The anti-imperialism of the black feminist movement

Black feminism attempted to extend the emancipatory horizons of the sixties revolutionary energies during the very moment that many of those anti-systemic movements were in sharp decline. Black feminist organizations and collectives emerged across the United States and Western European states. In Britain, groups like the Brixton Black Women's Group and the Organization of Women of African and Asian Descent, founded in 1973 and 1978 respectively, 'had an explicitly transnational focus and thought about how to link the liberatory work of African members of the diaspora to work being done on the African continent' (Olufemi, 2020: 15). Afro-German and Afro-Dutch women also began to organize as communities and create a movement, often in and through coalition with black lesbian feminists from the United States like Audre Lorde (Michaels, 2006). Central to all these movements was an insistence on seeing their own history and struggle in transnational terms, and these transnational identifications were not without precedent. The collective publications of seventies and eighties US black feminists — most notably, Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman*, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called My Back*, and Barbara Smith's *Home Girls* — attest to the movement's rich intellectual lineage. These pioneering anthologies functioned as pivotal spaces for the development of a transnational political consciousness within black feminist theorizing (Esparza, 2014).

Bambara's *The Black Woman*, published in 1970, brings together established women intellectuals of the black Left and a younger generation of black feminist writers. The former group includes contributors like Communist Party member Maude White Katz; Grace Lee Boggs, a close collaborator of C. L. R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya; and the *Freedomways* editor Jean Carey Bond. The playwright and activist Alice Childress also supported the collection (Higashida, 2011: 13). Many of the anthology's contributors met and collaborated in the vibrant political and cultural hub of Harlem in New York City. This milieu had been a cosmopolitan center for black nationalists and

liberationists since the Bolshevik Revolution, and became home to institutions like the *Freedom* and *Freedomways* journals, the Harlem Writers Guild, and the Committee for the Negro in the Arts. Paul Robeson founded *Freedom*, an internationalist newspaper that shared offices with the anti-colonial group Council on African Affairs, in 1950 to counter press censorship of him. In 1961, W. E. B. Du Bois, Louis E. Burnham, and Edward Strong established its successor, the journal *Freedomways*, whose editors included Shirley Graham Du Bois, Esther Cooper Jackson, and Alice Walker. These publications were seminal outlets for black feminist writers including Eslanda Robeson, Lorraine Hansberry, Esther Jackson, Jean Carey Bond, Gwendolyn Brooks, Vicki Garvin, Louise Thompson Patterson, Paule Marshall, and Alice Childress. *Freedomways* continued to publish throughout the seventies and early eighties. Under the direction of black feminist activist Esther Cooper Jackson in the mid-seventies, the journal began to deepen its analysis of black women's oppression. The first issue of 1975 included an editorial entitled 'Black Women: Internationalizing the Struggle' that asserted the need for a robust analysis of the position of black women — as 'the most discriminated against, oppressed and exploited segment of the US population' — 'within the framework of their historical relationship to the objective social forces and the objective conditions existing today' (*Freedomways*, 1975: 5).

According to Cheryl Higashida (2011: 14), this editorial 'essentially took up the leading thesis of leading Black Communist Claudia Jones,' which stated that black women constituted a vanguard within the United States that would pave the way to 'Socialist America.' It is Higashida's contention that the work of Claudia Jones — who, born in Trinidad, became the Communist Party's most prominent black women in the mid-century — established the theoretical grounds for the post-war black internationalist feminist movement. Claudia Jones was, in turn, deeply influenced by many of the aforementioned black women writers, including Shirley Graham Du Bois, Esther Cooper Jackson, Louise Thompson Patterson, and Vicki Garvin. Jones 'clarified the stake of the national question and its relationship to the women question,' Higashida (ibid.: 24) writes, by reiterating the Black Belt Nation Thesis, which defined black women in the so-called 'Black Belt' of the American South as a nation oppressed by American imperialist forces. The Black Belt Nation Thesis was first issued at the

Sixth World Congress of the Comintern, which Maude White Katz — one of the contributors to Bambara's 1970 anthology *The Black Woman* — attended in 1928.

One activist and intellectual who organized alongside Claudia Jones in London through anti-apartheid actions and women-centered groups, and who can be considered representative of the twentieth-century international network of black women leftists, is Eslanda Robeson. Whilst she did not refer to herself as a feminist due to the term's associations with bourgeois white women, she nevertheless became a prominent voice of black Left feminism (Umoren, 2018: 7). Robeson, raised in Harlem, traveled regularly throughout her life. Her journeys throughout South America, the Caribbean, Europe, and Francophone Africa and China enabled her to build coalitions with black and feminist internationalists and participate in global freedom struggles. Her connections with left-wing activists and politicians attracted the attention of the FBI, which feared that she might spread political dissent among colonial subjects and began to surveil her travels and activities. During the Red Scare, Eslanda Robeson, as well as her husband Paul Robeson and other prominent black leftists such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Claudia Jones, became targets of Cold War persecution. When called to testify before the US Senate in 1953, she refused to reply to questions regarding potential affiliations with the Communist Party (ibid.: 100). During this period, Robeson was involved in the black feminist organization Sojourners for Truth and Justice (STJ), alongside activists Louise Thompson Patterson and Alice Childress. The internationalist STJ preceded the black feminist organizations of the seventies that will be the focus of this chapter, in particular the Third World Women's Alliance and the Combahee River Collective. Many of the protagonists of this chapter, including figures such as Angela Davis and Audre Lorde, followed in Robeson's footsteps (ibid.: 112).

Next to *Freedomways*, the Harlem Writers Guild was another key locus of collaboration between black women writers in the post-war period that continued to host workshops and conferences throughout the seventies. The Guild was represented by Alice Childress, a black feminist writer who Cheryl Higashida (2011: 2) positions as a pioneer of the black internationalist feminism of the seventies that 'challenged heteronormative and masculinist articulations of nationalism while maintaining the importance, even centrality, of national liberation movements' to black women's

liberation. The Guild had a profound impact on the artistic and political development of many leading figures of the seventies black feminist movement, including Audre Lorde, who wrote in a letter to Julian Mayfield that she owed more than words can express ‘to the encouragement, stimulation, and insights gathered in those meetings’ (as cited in Gaines, 2002: 310). The City College of New York’s SEEK Program was yet another such milieu, where Audre Lorde taught alongside Toni Cade Bambara, Adrienne Rich, June Jordan, Barbara Christian, and Addison Gayle (ibid.: 306).

Whilst focusing primarily on US-based intellectuals during the seventies, this chapter argues that these black feminists refused to allow the field of their political vision and analysis to be determined by the boundaries of the nation-state, and carried forward a long tradition of black internationalist feminism that had been developing over the course of the twentieth century. A lack of attention to the transnational identifications of the US black feminists, as well as to the impact of twentieth-century black internationalism on their thought, produces a truncated understanding of the movement’s trajectory. In particular, I argue that without sustaining such a transnational and multi-generational perspective on the movement we misapprehend, or altogether miss, the significance of its sexual politics. Although the political climate of the early seventies narrowed the discursive parameters of the black feminist movement, obviating the possibility for members to publicly identify as lesbian, they nonetheless developed revolutionary analyses of non-heteronormative racial formations which conjoined their sexual and anti-imperialist politics. This shifted over the course of the second half of the decade, as more and more black feminists espoused an avowedly lesbian standpoint. Importantly, this standpoint maintained the anti-imperialist consciousness of earlier black feminist writers and activists.

### Transnationalizing black feminist history

The previous chapter showed that a domestic lens cannot account for the complex development of gay liberationism in the late sixties. The movement was firmly rooted within transnational circuits of intellectual and activist practices. The same is true of the black feminist

movement. This chapter demonstrates that much is obscured by the traditional story, which places black feminism's origins and evolutions firmly within the domestic context of the US nation-state (see Taylor, 1998; Harris, 2001; Kelley, 2002; Roth, 2004; Springer, 2005). The hallmark of this story is the notion that black feminism emerged primarily as a *response* to the misogyny of Black Power activists, on the one hand, and the racism within the women's liberation movement, on the other. In *Living for the Revolution*, one of the most comprehensive studies of the history of black feminist organizations, Kimberly Springer (2005: 44) encapsulates this common notion when she explains that black feminism 'formed in reaction to limits on black women's roles in the civil rights movement and to the rise of black masculinist rhetoric,' and 'because of the limited sisterhood frame, as defined by the women's movement and racism within it.' This section first outlines this widespread view of black feminism as emerging 'into a space created by the inability of both Black Liberation and white women's liberation to incorporate Black feminists as activists' (Roth, 2004: 127). It then considers more recent scholarship in which the transnational dimension of the black feminist movement takes center stage. It concludes that while these historiographical interventions have shed light on how the black feminists' analysis of race and gender was informed by various transnational dynamics and a thoroughly internationalist orientation, the sexual politics of the black feminists has yet to be situated within a transnational context.

### ***Between the cracks of the black liberation struggle and the women's movement***

Many black women assumed prominent roles within the Civil Rights movement of the fifties and sixties. Although they faced substantial barriers due to chauvinistic attitudes about what constituted appropriately 'female' tasks, they were able to participate alongside men in more horizontal ways as they were arrested, led bus boycotts, and organized voter registration drives (Roth, 2004: 81). Although their leadership roles were rarely acknowledged publicly, many black women were respected as wise elders and had considerable influence due to their grassroots connections to local southern communities (Springer, 2005: 23). From the mid-sixties onwards, however, the key southern

community base was supplanted by a student vanguard as the movement's social base became younger and moved to northern cities. This shift went hand in hand with 'an infusion of a masculinist version of Black nationalism' that led to a drastic narrowing of women's position within the movement (Roth, 2004: 76). The masculinist ideological program of black liberation groups during this period delimited the Black woman's standing within the struggle to the supportive duties of childrearing and housekeeping (ibid.: 84-85). It held that the relegation of black women to the private sphere would allow the black man to reclaim his manhood in the public sphere (Springer, 2005: 23).<sup>7</sup> This masculinist posturing overwhelmed solidarity between men and women in the movement.

The strengthening of patriarchal values was fueled in large part due to widely circulated assertions about 'black matriarchy' that were popularized in Harvard sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. This influential report diagnosed a veritable emasculation of black men that stemmed from the high rate of single mother-led households. It alleged that a 'disorganized' black family structure demoralized black men and was responsible for the persistence of poverty, crime, and sexual promiscuity within black communities (Kelley, 2002: 142). Moynihan claimed that the 'pathological' state of the black family originated on the slave plantations, since slavery imposed a reversal of roles onto black men and women and therefore deprived black men of their proper place as provider, protector, and head of the household (Springer, 2005: 37). These claims made the black woman appear as already emancipated due her participation in the labor force and her evasion of traditional 'womanly' obligations. It also fueled claims that black women were responsible for high rates of black male unemployment. However, as Kimberly Springer (ibid.: 38-39) corrects, in reality black women were trapped in sex-segregated employment, thus unable to pose job competition for black men, and found themselves at the bottom of the economic ladder relative to black men and white women. She notes further that 'the increased labor force participation of white women, their decreased dependence on marriage for financial security, and climbing divorce

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<sup>7</sup> Recent scholarship demonstrates that the Black Panther Party was, to a significant extent, an exception in this regard. Panther women, composing a membership majority by 1969, frequently challenged chauvinistic behavior within the Party and found within the revolutionary struggles of Vietnamese, Chinese, and North Korean women models for a transnational feminist consciousness (Young, 2019).



rates meant that the viability of the nuclear family was a dubious construct even for white Americans' (ibid.: 38). The Moynihan report legitimated not only state interventions that sought to reinstate the patriarchal nuclear family, but also those activists who argued that women's authority, assertiveness, and leadership within the movement contributed to the 'emasculatation' of black men. Black liberation struggles adopted these sociological theories that pathologized the black family, maintaining that 'Black women out of their traditional place were abetting [white] racism' by further undermining the black male (Roth, 2004: 85). This reassertion of bourgeois normative ideals of gendered and sexual life within black liberation struggles as a cure to this putatively matriarchal culture was also consistent with the anti-birth control stance of many black militants (Manning, 1983: 92).

The resurgence of masculinist ideology within the black liberation movements of the late sixties is considered a main reason for the establishment of numerous black feminist organizations, including notably the Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA) in 1968 and the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) in 1973. The Third World Women's Alliance, originally founded by Frances Beal as the Black Women's Liberation Committee, was the only successful project of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) after 1968. Of the TWWA's inception, Roth (2004: 91) writes: 'The TWWA was adamant in their insistence that black militant men were being "white" and middle class when they enforced middle-class gender roles and expected black women to be "breeders" for the revolution.' By the early seventies, the TWWA was establishing chapters on both coasts of the United States and reported a few hundred organization members. The National Black Feminist Organization, whose 1973 Eastern Regional Conference on Black Feminism in New York City over 500 women attended, also sought to expose the myth of a 'black matriarchy' and focused on issues that had been dismissed within the black liberation movement (Harris, 2001: 288-89). In 1974, several members of the Boston chapter formed an offshoot of the NBFO, the Combahee River Collective, which took a more explicitly socialist and anti-capitalist stance. Barbara Smith, one of the group's founders, reflects in an interview with Kimberly Springer on the masculinist turn from the Civil Rights movement to black liberation politics:

I actually imagined that I would never be politically active again because nationalism and patriarchal attitudes within black organizing was *so* strong — we're talking early '70s now — was so strong I just thought there would be no place ever for me to be politically active the way I had been in my prior life. But, then, I got involved in the women's movement through black feminism, the National Black Feminist Organization in 1973, and then I've been able to be active ever since.

(Springer, 2005: 56-57)

One of the main texts that members of the Combahee River Collective discussed was Toni Cade Bambara's watershed collection, *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, which was released in 1970 and became a manifesto of sorts for black feminists. The collection contained Frances Beal's landmark essay *Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female*, and numerous other pieces that responded to the impact of the Moynihan report on the masculinist ideology of black liberation activism (see Clark, 1970; Lindsey, 1970; Bond and Peery, 1970; Patton, 1970).

Whilst black women were confronting the entrenchment of patriarchal gender roles within the black liberation movement, predominantly white women's liberation groups were establishing themselves as a visible force on the Left. However, these groups did not become a natural home for black women. It should be noted that popular understandings of the period have greatly exaggerated the antagonism between black women and the feminist movement. Black women were organizing autonomously as feminists through caucuses within black liberation groups when women's liberation was in its early stages (Roth, 2004: 80), and many black women who later became active in groups like the National Black Feminist Organization had also been involved in the creation of the National Organization of Women (NOW) (Harris, 2001: 286). The emergence of black and white feminisms was largely simultaneous, with women in their own communities fashioning political visions that were distinct but nonetheless mutually influenced each other (Roth, 2003). Springer (2005: 28) has therefore argued that 'recognizing differential recruitment patterns of black women or different paths into the movement — those who rejected and those who joined predominately white women's

movement organizations — is critical to studying the emergence of black feminist organizations.’ She notes that a higher percentage of black women than white women sympathized with the women’s liberation movement, yet these women had substantial reasons for their hesitancy toward working on gender oppression from within the women’s movement (ibid.: 29). One primary reason was the inattentiveness to racial and class oppression that stemmed from a preoccupation with the issues of bourgeois white women’s lives. White women’s appeals to sisterhood rang hollow, Robin Kelley (2002: 141) argues, since white women and black women ‘related to each other as employers and employees rather than as “sisters.”’ Due to an overwhelming concern with cultural transformation and an insensitivity to the realities of race and class, the women’s movement organized around conceptions of womanhood, femininity, and motherhood that were constructed around the bourgeois domesticity of the white suburban housewife. This view of gendered oppression disavowed the historical relationship between white women and black women, ‘from the initial economic and domestic exploitation of the slave/mistress relationship’ to the normative juxtaposition of the delicate, respectable, and vulnerable femininity of white women to the aggressive, hypersexualized, and defeminized construction of black womanhood (Springer, 2005: 32). Other reasons for black women’s non-involvement in the women’s movement included fears that their participation would exacerbate tensions between black men and women and betray the interests of the black community by diverting political energies away from the black movement, into helping white women increase their relative share of power within white society (ibid.: 29).

The collective efforts of black and white women within the mainstream and the radical segments of the women’s movement achieved significant successes, including the 1968 election of the first black woman in Congress, Shirley Chisholm. However, tensions often came to a head within movement organizations. Ula Taylor (1998: 245-46) recounts a confrontation between white women from the National Organization of Women and members of the Third World Women’s Alliance in 1970 that resulted from white bourgeois feminists’ reluctance to condemn the political persecution of Angela Davis, as well as conflicts surrounding the issue of welfare. In her 1998 interview with Kimberly Springer (2005: 57), Barbara Smith of the Combahee River Collective expressed her alienation from

the white women's movement as a result of its focus on the legal and cultural barriers to bourgeois white women's entry into professional life as follows: 'I could never see myself joining a white women's organization. I just couldn't even imagine that. The first time I heard about feminism I thought those women were *crazy*. I thought they were *perfectly crazy*.' The historical tensions between these two groups were the subject of many essays in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman* (see Lincoln, 1970; Beal, 1970; Bambara, 1970) that explore white and black women's diverging experiences of, and political stances on, key issues such as sexual objectification and assault, birth control, abortion rights, beauty standards, and the nuclear family.

Where does this leave the black feminists' analysis of sexuality? Duchess Harris's account of the evolution of black feminism from 1961 to 1980 traces a steadily increasing progressivism on the question of lesbianism. Harris (2001: 282) writes that the black feminists on President Kennedy's Commission on the Status of Women 'articulated more conservative notions about gender than the women of the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) who, in turn, articulated more conservative notions about female sexuality and the disadvantages of the capitalist system than the women of the Combahee River Collective.' Combahee members' more progressive stance on sexuality is evidenced, according to Harris, by their recognition of the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity. In her analysis, the black feminist movement shifted its 'relatively liberal and univocal focus on gender' to a 'more radical and polyvocal focus on gender, race, class, and sexual orientation' (ibid.). Benita Roth (2003: 51) has also subscribed to this view, stating that the Combahee River Collective 'added heterosexism to the intersection of oppressions, ending the relative silence in Black feminist theory over lesbianism.' This widespread understanding of black feminism's sexual politics is supported with reference to the Combahee River Collective's active efforts to carve out a space for lesbians within the collective. Renowned black lesbian poets, including Audre Lorde, Lorraine Bethel, Cheryl L. Clarke, and Akasha Gloria Hull, as well as former members of the homophile organization Daughters of Bilitis, like Margo Okaza-Rey, attended their series of Black Women's Network Retreats, held between 1977 and 1980. On the agenda at these retreats were a number of items related to

lesbianism, including the question of lesbian separatism, the woman-identified woman, love between lesbian and non-lesbian feminists, and black lesbianism (Harris, 2001: 295-96; Springer, 2005: 106-07).

Indeed, the Combahee River Collective is exceptionalized within much of the literature for its break with the alleged conservatism of early black feminist organizations. Robin Kelley (2002: 148) understands Combahee's explicit incorporation of heterosexuality as an institution of oppression within their collective statement as a direct response to the NBFO's failure to speak to the needs of lesbian women; Ula Taylor (1998: 249) emphasizes the black liberation movement's condemnation of homosexuality as an immorality or aberration; and Gladys Jiménez-Muñoz (1995: 114) and Benita Roth (2004: 122) point to lesbian separatism's institutional and ideological exclusion of black women and children. However, Kimberly Springer (2005: 114) has since challenged this model of a linear evolution within black feminist practice that culminates with the Combahee River Collective, asserting that the black feminist movement was 'polyvocal from the start.' In particular, she cites the Third World Women's Alliance's early critiques of heterosexism and receptiveness to the concerns of its lesbian members. The East and West Coast branches of the TWWA responded differently to an eruption of homophobia within the organization that was comparable to the 'Lavender Menace' in NOW. Whilst lesbian members of the West Coast branch left or were expelled, these developments prompted a reckoning with lesbianism in the East Coast branch. The TWWA, Springer (ibid.: 132) writes, identified lesbian-baiting as a strategy to divide the organization, incorporated anti-heterosexist language into its established principles, and 'eventually saw the inclusion of lesbians as an opportunity for growth in its organizational objectives.' Both a 1971 and 1972 issue of the Third World Women's Alliance's newspaper, *Triple Jeopardy*, published a position paper called 'Women in the Struggle' that contained the following statement:

Whereas behavior patterns based on rigid sex roles are oppressive to both men and women, role integration should be attempted. [...] Furthermore, whether homosexuality is societal or genetic in origin, it exists in the third world community. The oppression and dehumanizing

ostracism that homosexuals face must be rejected and their right to exist as dignified human beings must be defended.

(Third World Women's Alliance, 1971: 9)

As Springer (2005: 133) rightly mentions, this pioneering statement was 'chronologically well in advance of Combahee's later assertion of the existence of lesbian and gay men in black communities.' It is furthermore worth noting the existence of earlier groups such as the Salsa Soul Sisters, which had its roots in the Black Lesbian Caucus of the New York City Gay Activists Alliance (Duberman, 2019: 327-31).

This section has summarized the traditional view of the black feminist movement which identifies its main cause as a combination of 'the masculinist posturing of both the New Left and Black Power movements' and 'the failure of many white feminist groups to grapple with racism' (Kelley, 2002: 143). The domestic and US-centric focus of this analysis risks particularizing black feminism as a self-defensive reaction to the dominant movements of the period, rather than an autonomous movement with its own independent genealogy and development. It brackets the connections to Third World feminist struggles through which black feminism established itself, as well as the movement's decided anti-imperialist consciousness. Separate historiographical tendencies have sought to correct this narrow, domestic story by shedding light on how black feminist practices within the US have been shaped by transnational processes.

### ***The transnational renarrativation of black feminism***

An alternative strand of historiography presents a genealogy of black feminism that foregrounds the question of how social practices of liberation within the United States were invigorated by the processes that were unfolding across and beyond its national borders. This scholarship demonstrates that the political imaginaries of the US black internationalist tradition were profoundly shaped by activists' political and affective ties to anti-imperialist and anti-colonial

movements in the Third World, grounding the very construction of the political categories ‘black feminist’ and ‘Third World woman’ in this context. Extant historiographies which position black feminism as an anti-racist critique of the women’s movement or an anti-sexist critique of the black liberation movement, these scholars argue, ignore the international politics of the post-war period. The decades during which the black feminists of the seventies came to political consciousness witnessed the gathering of an international coalition of Third World nations in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955; the rise of inspirational Third World leaders including Mao Zedong in the People’s Republic of China, Amílcar Cabral in Guinea-Bissau, and Che Guevara and Fidel Castro in Cuba; national wars of independence waged against Britain by the Mau Mau in Kenya, against the United States by the Viet Cong in Vietnam, and against France by the Front de Libération Nationale in Algeria and by the Cameroonian Peoples Union in Cameroon; independence under Kwame Nkrumah’s Ghana in 1957, followed by the liberation of almost thirty more nations throughout the sixties; the 1961 assassination of Patrice Lumumba, leader of the Congolese National Movement; and the creation of the Organization of African Unity in 1963. A nascent scholarly consensus is that we cannot fully make sense of the US black feminist movement outside these global affairs. The adoption of a transnational lens reveals how black feminist practice ‘crafted a new diasporic public sphere’ through material and ideological interconnections with the Third World ‘as a mode through which to contest US economic, racial, and cultural arrangements’ (Young, 2006: 3). In the words of historian Kevin Gaines (2002: 296, 294), ‘the roots of black feminism lay not simply in a critique of the patriarchal gender politics of the Black Power movement’ but rather must be understood ‘in a symbiotic relationship to a black radical culture of internationalism.’

Tellingly, the decision to rename the Black Women’s Liberation Committee as the Third World Women’s Alliance reflected a cognitive shift from a minoritarian to a diasporic position and was prompted by a request from women in the Puerto Rican independence movement who wanted to join the organization (Blackwell, 2014: 303). The Third World Women’s Alliance further internationalized its agenda by establishing formal coalitions with Asian, Chicana, and Native American women. A cursory glance at the issues of the TWWA’s newspaper, *Triple Jeopardy*, reveals the anti-imperialist

ideology and transnational orientation of the organization. It contained articles and poems about women's roles in myriad liberation struggles and solidarity movements, including in Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Yemen, Vietnam, Chile, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Palestine, and China. These reports heavily outweighed the coverage of women's and black liberation movements within the US. The newspaper also published several bilingual issues and Spanish special issues due to their critical readership in the New York Latina activist community (ibid.: 303-04). Its analysis of the exploitation of Third World women drew the attention of the FBI's COINTELPRO program, which conducted routine summaries of the newspaper and noted its contacts with enemies of the state like Angela Davis and Lolita Lebrón (Springer, 2005: 92). The transnational activities of the TWWA's most active members were also integral to its transnational agenda. Frances Beal identified strongly with the anti-imperialist, Pan-Africanist politics of SNCC and was a member of its International Affairs Commission when she founded the organization. In an interview with Benita Roth (2004: 90), she recounts how she developed these political commitments during her time in Paris, where she lived in the early to mid-sixties, studied Frantz Fanon's work, and met Malcolm X and African liberation fighters. The following excerpt from the interview, where Beal explains why her internationalist consciousness was antithetical to the masculinist ideology of black militants, appears to contradict Roth's otherwise domestic focus:

I've become conscious of the colonial world, of imperialism, of Africa, of all of these various different things, of Vietnam... so my consciousness has gone from tiny little Binghamton [where Beal was born], to New York, to a world, to Paris, to a world... so that my mind is expanding and becoming very intellectually active, and on the home front, I'm being told to put myself into this little box. ... And the contradiction becomes just too big.

(Roth, 2004: 90)

This contradiction made founding what would become the Third World Women's Alliance 'the logical next step in organizing' for Beal (ibid.). A few years later, Cheryl Perry would establish a West Coast



chapter of the organization. After several comrades on the fourth Venceremos Brigade introduced Perry to the TWWA, she moved closer to the Venceremos Brigade headquarters on the West Coast, established a chapter of the TWWA there, and recruited a number of *brigadistas* into the organization (Springer, 2005: 49). These illegal trips thus proved essential not only to the trajectory of the Gay Liberation Front, as the previous chapter outlined, but also to the expansion of the Third World Women's Alliance.

The early life of Angela Davis illustrates how an internationalist black feminist consciousness successfully linked disparate Third World contexts to domestic anti-racist struggles. By her mid-twenties, Davis had studied under Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno at the Frankfurt School in Germany, had spent a month living in Cuba, and had met Vietnamese and Algerian anti-colonialists during her travels across the metropolises of Europe. She was, like Frances Beal, rather far removed from the Civil Rights movement of the sixties, and her analysis of US state violence was informed by the anti-colonial Marxist political stance that she developed during her years abroad. As Cynthia Young (2006: 207) writes: 'If integration's political appeal required an affirmation that black people were indeed citizens faithful to the ideals of the nation-state, Davis implicitly reframed civil rights disobedience as an act of resistance to the nation-state that went beyond the challenging of Jim Crow segregation.' In other words, Angela Davis's internationalist orientation exposed the deepening contradictions of the US nation-state by explaining the political crisis engendered by the Civil Rights movement as a result of its challenge to the nation-state's dependence on the disenfranchisement of racialized subjects. This disenfranchisement was shared, according to Davis's anti-colonial framework, by racialized populations in the United States and in the Third World: hence the common view of the black ghetto as an 'internal colony.' It was this ideological frame that allowed Angela Davis and other black feminists 'to bridge the local, national, and international levels of analysis and struggle' (ibid.).

In a detailed study of Bambara's anthology, *The Black Woman*, Kevin Gaines (2002: 309-10) argues that black feminist writing was 'an autonomous project' that did not owe its existence to gender and racial conflicts within the masculinist black liberation groups or women's movement: 'There is ample evidence that black women writers were refining their craft long before the appearance of the

Moynihan report and the rise of Black Power.’ In particular, he suggests that the volume’s inclusion of Paule Marshall’s 1962 essay ‘Reena’ is indicative of the inspiration that black feminists in northern urban ghettos drew from the African independence movements of the decolonization era. These freedom struggles, Gaines (ibid.: 301) argues, animated diasporic communities in Harlem and provided the context for black feminist consciousness-raising and practice. Understanding this internationalism as the setting of black feminism’s emergence recasts the struggle against the myth of black matriarchy as but one site of the elaboration of a black feminist practice, as these activists were able to frame their analysis of patriarchy and masculinist ideology through an anti-imperialist, Third World lens. Gaines (ibid.: 303): ‘In its new guise, running the gamut from intimate relationships to transnational revolutionary movements, internationalism provided a language by which black feminists contested black male militants’ attempts to circumscribe the role of women within activist groups.’

The racial tensions within feminist organizing must also be understood through this transnational lens. In her landmark essay, *White Women Listen!*, Hazel V. Carby (1982: 110-28) argues that white women’s nonrecognition of lives, histories, and experiences of black women stemmed from the long history of Western imperialism. She exposed the colonial imaginaries of the women’s liberation movement by interrogating the civilizational discourses within feminist invocations of historical progress and their descriptions of so-called ‘barbarous’ sexual practices; the various relations of dependence and hierarchy that persist between white and Third World women in both colonial and metropolitan contexts; and black women’s experience of the family as a site of political resistance during periods of colonialism. Much feminist scholarship in the following decades has sought to clarify white women’s roles within Western imperialist endeavors (see McClintock, 1995; Midgley, 2007; Naghibi, 2007; Wekker, 2016). It shows that throughout the history of Western feminism white women’s empowerment depended centrally on the subjugation of non-Western women as feminists linked improvements in their own position to empire-building efforts. Indeed, Louise Michele Newman (1999: 22-55) argues that the women’s movement grew to unprecedented heights precisely at the moment when feminist campaigners arrogated to themselves the role of ‘conservators of race traits’

and of ‘civilizers.’ White women’s entry into the public sphere, according to Newman, was enabled by the notion that bourgeois white women were uniquely placed to convey civilization to racial and class inferiors — both black, Native American, and Asian immigrant women within their midst and the primitive others within the colonial settlements. In Newman’s (ibid.: 23) words, ‘the emergence of a strong imperialist sentiment, the effort to establish the United States as an empire, and the extension of missions, both domestically and abroad, fundamentally influenced the direction and content of white feminist thought.’

This history was not lost on the black feminists of the seventies. An awareness of how the alleged racial superiority of white women was used as a vehicle to advance the colonial project is apparent in the following passage from Gwen Patton’s contribution to Barbara’s *The Black Woman*:

The raping, pillaging, and exploiting of other peoples and lands have always been done in the name of white ‘ladyhood’: to please them more with jewels, money, etc. This same raping and pillaging has been done in the name of preserving white ‘ladyhood’ and protecting her from the savage beasts who were all born with the desire to sexually rape any and all white women they see.

(Patton, 1970: 181)

It is also only through an appreciation of the mutual constitution of feminist and colonial discourses that Audre Lorde’s widely circulated open letter to Mary Daly, in which she expresses a critical view of her book *Gyn/Ecology*, can be properly understood. Lorde (1979a: 58) notes that, whilst the book’s first section on female spiritual symbols and goddesses does not include any examples of non-white, non-European deities, the following section includes non-white, non-European women only to then represent them as victims of genital mutilation. Of Daly’s distortion and erasure of African history and black feminist work, Lorde (ibid.: 60) writes: ‘When patriarchy dismisses us, it encourages our murderers. When radical lesbian feminist theory dismisses us, it encourages its own demise.’ This accusation should not be read as Lorde pleading for entry into the bourgeois white women’s

movement, but rather as an indictment of a dominant strand of 'First World' white women's organizing that rallied around the cry of white racial superiority, that successfully challenged the confining boundaries of a bourgeois domesticity only by asserting white women's greater moral and civilizational status.

The Indochinese Women's Conference (IWC) in April 1971 became a flashpoint for these historical tensions. Around one thousand women activists from the US and Canada gathered in Vancouver for an opportunity to meet their 'sisters' from North and South Vietnam and Laos. Judy Tzu-Chun Wu's (2013) history of this event reveals that the conference, in whose planning members of the Third World Women's Alliance were involved, was fraught with a series of conflicts and became a primary site for various feminist groups to articulate their political differences. One of the IWC's primary sponsors were maternalist women's peace organizations. The predominantly bourgeois and middle-aged women that represented them publicly identified as mothers and housewives, and used these identities as a vehicle for their political activism. In her profile of these maternalist groups, Wu (ibid.: 202) explains that their condemnation of war 'was conveyed through heteronormative and maternal loss.' They subscribed to essentialist discourses about motherhood, the justificatory ground for their allegedly unique ability to foster peace, and emphasized the ruinous impact of war and violence on sacrosanct bourgeois family life. The women's liberation groups in attendance, on the other hand, rejected 'traditional' gender roles and viewed the Vietnamese women as an empowered, militant community that was successfully disintegrating patriarchal structures across all spheres of life through their struggle for freedom (ibid.: 206). Finally, the third sponsors of IWC — Third World women from the US and Canada, some of whom had also traveled to Vietnam — considered themselves as the subjects of internal colonies and hence as aligned with the Vietnamese women in their fight against colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist oppression (ibid.: 211).

Numerous hostilities between these groups erupted at the conference. One conflict in particular coalesced around the issue of sexuality when the Radicalesbians asked the delegation of Vietnamese and Laotian women if they had sex with each other in the fields. This question sparked outrage, with some of the delegates protesting the question by walking off stage and cancelling

workshops with the predominantly white lesbian groups. This response was in turn framed as evidence of their homophobic attitudes (Ly, 2017: 148). It is better understood, however, as a riposte to bourgeois white lesbian feminism's collusion with imperialist ideology. The radical lesbians' question, Ly (ibid.: 150) writes, evinced a conception of sexual freedom that is rooted in 'the Enlightenment-inspired bifurcation between invisible and visible and between private and public expressions of desire (where in both cases the former are oppressive, while the latter are aligned with freedom).' The fixation on visibility and public sex also rehearses the militaristic strategies of surveillance, identification, and hypervisibility that undo the divisions of private and public space during war, rendering targets vulnerable to (often sexualized) violence both within so-called 'private' sites and 'in the fields.' Ly (ibid.: 152) hence concludes that by exiting the stage, the Southeast Asian delegates were 'quite literally refusing to be exposed.'

These troubled encounters at the Indochinese Women's Conference fundamentally altered the trajectory of lesbian feminism. According to Ly (ibid.: 147), it was also within this context that black feminists began to 'articulate their impossible position within singular struggles for inclusion into a Euro-American-led global state universality simultaneously predicated on racial, patriarchal, capitalist and settler violence.' At the very least, this conflict at the IWC illustrates how central debates around sexual politics were to the formation and trajectory of black feminism. Nevertheless, the historiographical literature is almost entirely silent on the question of sexuality. Efforts to think black feminist analyses of race and gender transnationally have yet to be extended to the sexual politics of the movement. Since the black feminist organizations of the early seventies were widely considered to have lacked a concern with matters of sexuality, the scholarly debate about the transnational origins of these organizations elided those matters. And although the black feminist groups of the late seventies like the Combahee River Collective foregrounded lesbianism and heterosexist critique, they have been largely omitted from the scholarly inquiry of transnationally oriented historians. The sexual politics of these late-seventies black feminist groups has garnered attention almost exclusively from the domestically focused historiographical literature. This includes, for example, investigations of Audre Lorde's writing that reduce her theory of the erotic to a meditation on the 'struggle to navigate racial difference and

sexual desire [...] in the Women's Liberation Movement' (Strongman, 2018: 42). The remaining sections of this chapter home in on the sexual politics of the black feminist movement to counter two characteristics of the scant attention it has received within the literature: first, the proposition that early black feminist groups suppressed or were not primarily concerned with the question of sexuality, and, second, the reluctance to draw direct links between the centrality of lesbianism in the later years of the movement and black feminists' transnational identifications and internationalist visions.

### Hidden in plain sight: The sexual politics of black feminism

From its inception, the black feminist movement articulated forceful critiques of the racialized sexual subjugation of Third World women. The common view within the literature that, among the black feminist organizations of the seventies, the Combahee River Collective was uniquely progressive because, as Duchess Harris (2001: 282) expresses it, they 'recognized that one's sexual orientation was distinctive and separate from gender and racial identity' is problematic, since it adopts the very epistemological frame that rendered black feminist attempts to theorize the mutual constitutiveness of gendered, sexual, and racial oppression, as well as to organize against this reality, illegible. It is no doubt true, as many have noted, that the general reluctance on the part of black feminists to publicly identify with lesbianism was in large part due to fears of lesbian-baiting or of placing oneself in moral opposition to powerful institutions like the black church (Springer, 2005: 500). But these hesitations by no means led to acquiescence or an accommodation to the dominant hetero-centric and masculinist ideology and sexual politics of the black movement. This is confirmed by contemporaneous writing. In Barbara Smith's groundbreaking black feminist anthology, *Home Girls*, numerous contributors drew direct connections between the popular myths of black matriarchy and heteropatriarchal ideology. Ann Allen Shockley (1979: 85) argued that they guaranteed 'a new subserviency at the expense of Black womanhood' at the same time that they 'added impetus to the Black community's negative image of homosexuality.' The black lesbian, she writes, constituted 'a *sexual* threat' to black manhood. In other words, the black liberation movement's embrace of masculinist ideology was inseparable from

its alignment with heterosexist discourse. Shockley (ibid.) sees this represented in the following quote by ‘champion of male chauvinism,’ Muhammad Ali: “Some professions shouldn’t be open to women because they can’t handle certain jobs, like construction work. Lesbians, maybe, but not women.” Shockley replies with the question: ‘What is a Lesbian if not a woman?’ This simple question, evoking Sojourner Truth’s often-cited question, ‘ain’t I a woman?’, forces a reckoning with the tensions and incommensurability between the categories of ‘lesbianism,’ ‘womanhood,’ and ‘blackness.’ If Sojourner Truth was accounting for the black woman’s exclusion from the purportedly universal category of ‘woman,’ Shockley here reveals how the black lesbian functions as the excess of (black) womanhood. That is, the heterosexist ideology that black liberation invested in rendered the black lesbian unintelligible as the representative subject of available identity categories, therefore unable to constitute herself as a subject. Like Sojourner Truth, Ann Allen Shockley does not give an answer to her own question. It could be understood as a rhetorical question with an obvious, affirmative answer. Alternatively, we might follow Kai M. Green (2017: 441), who has recently proposed that this openness be understood ‘as a proposition to dwell in the question.’ Rather than seeking resolution through inclusion into the category of (black) womanhood, we might understand Shockley’s question as an invitation to interrogate how the specter of the black lesbian continuously disorganizes and threatens the constitutive subject formations of black liberationism and, by extension, wider heteropatriarchal structures. It therefore pointed to the suppression and regulation of non-normative sexual subjectivities upon which the masculinist ideology of the black liberation movement depended.

A central objective of black feminist writing was to expose the heteropatriarchal underpinnings of Moynihan’s theory of a black matriarchal culture. In another contribution to the collection *Home Girls*, Cheryl Clarke writes:

The concept of the black family has been exploited since the publication of the infamous Moynihan report [...]. Because the insular, privatized nuclear family is upheld as the model of Western family stability, all other forms — for example, the extended family, the female-headed family, the lesbian family — are devalued. Many black people, especially middle-class black

people, have accepted the male-dominated nuclear family model, though we have had to modify it because black women usually must work outside the home. [...] Black family lifestyles and homosexual lifestyles are not antithetical. Most black lesbians and gay men grew up in families and are still critically involved with their families. Many black lesbians and gay men are raising children. Why must the black family be so strictly viewed as the result of a heterosexual dyad?

(Clarke, 1983: 193)

This remarkable essay extends Dennis Altman's critique of the private nuclear family model in *Homosexuality: Oppression and Liberation* to a critique of those discourses that posited the black family as an aberration to the same heteronormative ideal of family life. This quote highlights that the exclusion of black family life from the prescriptions of heteronormativity ties blackness to a form of domination that is experienced by homosexual communities, and entangles the black feminist movement with the struggles for sexual liberation. However, it also sheds light on the limitations of gay liberationism's analysis of heteronormativity, insofar as it failed to account for how deeply imbricated this system of power was with forms of racial domination and exploitation. What the gay liberationists lacked was, in the words of Cathy Cohen (1997: 447-48), a 'recognition that "nonnormative" procreation patterns and family structures of people who are labeled heterosexual have also been used to regulate and exclude *them*.' Black feminist critiques of the heteropatriarchal myths amplified by the Moynihan report maintained that non-white sexual formations had always been controlled and undermined by the US nation-state. They hence identified the white supremacist roots of heteronormative ideals and placed the state regulation of non-normative sexual formations within the history of racist exploitation and violence. In a close reading of Kay Lindsey's chapter from Barbara's anthology *The Black Woman*, Tiffany Lethabo King (2018: 74) notes that the essay successfully illustrates how 'white heteronormative gender, sexuality and family formations' cohere through their categorical relation to imperial violence, conquest, enslavement, and property accumulation. The Moynihan report's pathologization of black women was yet another iteration of the devaluation of



racialized life through an estrangement from the protected institutions of ‘proper’ sexuality. As whiteness is tethered to the male-led private nuclear household, unexpected forms of alliance emerge for those populations that are unable to conform to the ideals of heteronormativity.

Moynihan’s contention that the origins of poverty and crime could be traced back to the emasculation or ‘castration’ of the black man generated a series of state policies that demanded the regulation of black intimate arrangements and legitimated the exploitation of racialized workforces. In short, it promoted discourses about the deviancy of non-heteronormative racial formations that would authorize regulatory and exploitative state practices. The black feminist movement’s divestment from these discourses was therefore a categorical contestation of heteronormativity (Ferguson, 2004: 121-25). Many black feminists regarded the pervasive sexual stereotyping of black men and women as representative of the Moynihan report’s exclusion of racialized populations from regulatory norms of heteropatriarchal culture. In their 1970 essay, ‘Is the Black Male Castrated?’, Jean Carey Bond and Patricia Peery (1970: 145) argued that recurrent tropes peddled by movies and radio shows strengthened the ‘matriarchal fairy tale.’ The black woman, they write, ‘is depicted as iron-willed, effectual, treacherous toward and contemptuous of Black men, the latter being portrayed as simpering, ineffectual whipping boys.’ By positing non-heteronormative black family life as aberrant and demonizing black single mothers, Ferguson (2004: 124) claims, these stereotypes established the ‘moral grammar’ and ‘discursive origins for the dismantling of welfare as part of the fulfillment of global capital by the millennium’s end.’ The myth of black matriarchy became a key ideological device during the following decades as it enabled the polarization between upwardly-mobile, heteronormative black bourgeois subjects and the continued impoverishment of non-heteronormative black social formations.

Angela Davis (1972: 100) had already identified the myth of black matriarchy as ‘an open weapon of ideological warfare’ in as early as 1972. In an essay about the historical role of black women within slave communities, she refuted Moynihan’s suggestion that the slave economy had produced a matriarchal black woman. The slaveholding class, Davis (ibid.: 82) makes plain, never would have recognized the black woman as a source of authority. However, by virtue of her dual position of, on the

one hand, 'deformed' equality with black men (which stemmed from her participation in production) and, on the other hand, responsibility for the reproduction of the slave community, the black woman became 'uniquely capable of weaving into the warp and woof of domestic life a profound consciousness of resistance' (ibid.: 89). Davis therefore subversively penned a reminder of the black woman's historical role in inspiring and leading open forms of rebellion, resistance, and counter-insurgency at the very moment when the political establishment was propagating an image of the black woman as the cause of urban uprisings across the US and as the figure of the disorganization of urban social relations. The primary social function of the Moynihan Report, for Davis (ibid.: 100), was depoliticizing, driving women 'back into the shadows, lest an aggressive posture resurrect the myth in themselves.'

This analysis led black feminists to characterize black militants who adopted myths about black male emasculation as 'assuming a counter-revolutionary position' (Beal, 1970: 113). In one of her essays in *The Black Woman*, Toni Cade Bambara (1970: 123-24) clarifies her opposition to 'the stereotypic definitions of "masculine" and "feminine"' as not only 'a lot of merchandising nonsense' but also as 'an obstacle to political consciousness' and 'total self-autonomy.' Their analyses suggest that black feminism occupied a political space that contested dominant forms of gender and sexual differentiation, troubled categories such as 'womanhood' that occlude the multiple determinations of identity along the axes of racial, gender, and sexual differentiation, and rejected the heteropatriarchal discourses and practices that proscribed bodily autonomy. Indeed, the latter was raised in debates about sexual assault and the forced sterilization of racialized women (Manning, 1983: 101-02). In *The Black Woman*, numerous essays examine the differential experience of women with birth control. Whilst white women within the feminist movement considered access to abortion and the pill as key to their sexual emancipation, racialized women were contending with a history of racist family planning policies, eugenics, and forced surgical sterilization (Kelley: 2002, 144-45). In 'Double Jeopardy,' Frances Beal (1970: 116) thus refers to state-sponsored birth control in racialized communities as 'a method of outright surgical genocide.'

Black feminist groups, including the Third World Women's Alliance, often used the phrase 'sexual oppression' to refer to these various racialized forms of both gender and sexual domination. While, as mentioned above, some historians have regarded the failure of early-seventies black feminists to draw a clear distinction between sexual orientation and gender identity, or to explicitly name heterosexism as a source of oppression, as evidence that they 'faced a lack of language to describe the diversity within biological sex and gender, homophobia, and fear of difference' (Springer, 2005: 134), my contention here is that their notion of 'sexual oppression' is better understood as a refusal to fragment or isolate the systems of oppression that structure black women's lives. For this reason, the avowedly lesbian black feminists of the late-seventies rejected the notion that earlier black feminists were unconcerned with the question of sexuality. In one 1978 essay, Barbara Smith considered the work of Toni Morrison to be an antecedent to her own black lesbian writing. She explains:

Despite the apparent heterosexuality of the female characters I discovered in re-reading *Sula* that it works as a lesbian novel not only because of the passionate friendship between Sula and Nel, but because of Morrison's consistently critical stance towards the heterosexual institutions of male/female relationships, marriage, and the family. Consciously or not, Morrison's work poses both lesbian and feminist questions about Black women's autonomy and their impact upon each other's lives.

(Smith, 1978: 23)

Although there is an apparent silence on the subject of lesbianism, Barbara Smith nevertheless insists that a critical black feminist reading of Morrison's novel reveals a non-heteronormative perspective and politics. Elsewhere, Barbara Smith (1982: xxxiii) acknowledges the playwright Lorraine Hansberry as another foremother of seventies black lesbian feminism, who 'was asking in a Lesbian context some of the same questions we are asking today.' Her play *Les Blancs*, in particular, examined gender and sexuality through the prism of anti-colonialism and national liberation. Hansberry's anti-imperialist politics was sharpened by her work for Paul Robeson's newspaper *Freedom*, for which she covered

women's involvement in liberation struggles across the Third World. According to Cheryl Higashida (2011: 59), it was after leaving *Freedom* that 'Hansberry's Black internationalist feminism evolved to explore lesbian desire as a site for undoing the intertwining of militarization, US Cold War nationalism, and heteropatriarchy.' Indeed, *Les Blancs* fuses a critique of heteropatriarchy with an analysis of global colonialist capitalism. Her transnational approach therefore deeply informed her defiance of heteronormativity and her representation of lesbian desire as harboring political implications for anti-colonial struggle.

The biography of Lorraine Hansberry once again highlights that the sexual politics of the black feminists was irreducibly internationalist in its orientation. The analyses of seventies black feminism that targeted the heteropatriarchal discourses propagated by the Moynihan report cannot be disconnected from the national liberation movements that spawned the globe during this period. A nation-based framework confines the black feminists to a domestic context and oversimplifies their critique, removing from view their insistence that the pathologization of black intimate arrangements as incongruent with heteropatriarchal dictates was part and parcel of a long history of Western imperialist expansion and colonial violence. Consider the following statements:

Black people must go back to the roots of African culture, and they will find that the African family acted as a unit with each member contributing productively: while the warrior went hunting for food, the mother and the children would fight off invaders and enemies; and, while the mother tilled the earth, the father would tend the children.

(Patton, 1970: 184)

I am convinced, at least in my readings of African societies, that prior to the European obsession of property as a basis for social organization [...] communities were egalitarian and cooperative. The woman was neither subordinate nor dominant, but a sharer in policymaking and privileges, had mobility and opportunity and dignity. And while it would seem she had certain tasks to perform and he particular duties to attend, there were no hard and fixed

assignments based on gender, no rigid and hysterical separation based on sexual taboos. [...] There is evidence, however, that the European white was confused and alarmed by the egalitarian system of these societies and did much to wreck it, creating wedges between the men and women.

(Bambara, 1970: 126-27)

[T]raditionally, Black women have always bonded together in support of each other, however uneasily and in the face of whatever other allegiances which militated against that bonding. [...] We need only look at the close, although highly complex and involved, relationships between African co-wives, or at the Amazon warriors of ancient Dahomey who fought together as the King's main and most ferocious bodyguard.

(Lorde, 1978a: 39)

In these quotes, Gwen Patton, Toni Cade Bambara, and Audre Lorde treat the binaristic organization of gender and sexual life in the West as itself a colonial imposition that obliterated non-Western, non-white ways of knowing and being. The destruction of egalitarian, non-hierarchical, and non-differentiated pre-colonial formations is posited as the basis for Western 'civilization.' They demonstrate that the black feminists understood the deep imbrication of gender, sexuality, and race to occur via the process of empire building. The sexual oppression to which black women in the US were subjected did not exist outside a global system of capitalist imperialism. Black feminists have long noted that the struggle against characterizations of women as fragile, weak, and chaste mobilized around a construction of bourgeois white womanhood that not only excluded racialized metropolitan women from its imaginary, but also juxtaposed itself to inferior colonized women who were presumed to lack the 'developed' traits that Western sexual and gender differentiation conferred. The attentiveness of black feminists to the hierarchized construction of sexuality and gender along racial lines produced an understanding of how 'the madness of "masculinity" and "femininity,"' as Bambara (1970: 124) calls it, congealed through the advancement of the colonial project. As María Lugones

(2007: 202) argues, the protected institution of bourgeois white femininity was unavailable to non-white, colonized women ‘even when they were turned into similes of bourgeois white women.’

Frances Beal demonstrates this transnational perspective in her essay ‘Double Jeopardy,’ where she identifies the colonial roots of surgical violence against black women in the United States. Highlighting how sites of colonial occupation have served for the US ‘as a huge experimental laboratory for medical research before allowing certain practices to be imported and used here,’ Beal (1970: 117) uncovers the US state’s history of sponsoring forced sterilizations in the Third World via agencies like the Peace Corps. She begins her analysis by citing staggering statistics about the rates of forcible surgical sterilization in India and Puerto Rico, only then turning to the effects of these ‘imported’ methods within the US itself. The essay therefore clarifies the enmeshment of the violence that black women experience at the hands of the medical establishment — evidenced in the rates of child-bearing deaths and forced hysterectomies, as well as the lack of access to safe abortions — with imperialism. If the racialized sexual oppression of black women was constituted through colonization, then the liberation of black women would only be achieved through anti-colonial struggle. Drawing inspiration from Frantz Fanon’s description of the Algerian liberation struggle’s undoing of traditional and constraining ways of life in *A Dying Colonialism*, Toni Cade Bambara (1970: 133) hence declares that anti-imperialist struggle would enable people to free themselves from the heteronormative family, described as ‘a socially ordained nuclear unit to perpetuate the species or legitimize sexuality,’ and instead create extended kinship networks that are united ‘in the business of actualizing a vision of a liberated society.’

If the sexual politics of early-seventies black feminist thought has often remained ‘hidden in plain sight,’ as this section has argued, the writings on eroticism, desire, and sexuality of late-seventies black lesbian feminists have been read and understood in isolation from the anti-imperialist commitments and internationalist outlook of the black feminist movement as a whole. The final section argues that the meaning and implications of this body of work, represented perhaps most famously by Audre Lorde’s musings on the erotic, cannot be fully appreciated without situating it within the tradition of anti-imperialist theorizing. Placing black lesbian feminist work within this

transnational context of twentieth-century anti-imperialist internationalism generates a new set of considerations of its theoretical and political horizons.

### The anti-imperialist consciousness of black lesbian feminism

The black lesbian feminist writings of the late seventies are often epitomized by the Combahee River Collective's (1977: 210) statement: '[W]e are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives.' This articulation of subjectivity as multiply determined along various axes of social differentiation provided an alternative to the ostensibly universal and homogeneous visions of identity that are privileged by nationalist epistemologies. Far from constituting a celebration or commodification of difference, so characteristic of following decades' dominant neoliberal logics, this programmatic statement resuscitated, in Ferguson's (2004: 126) words, 'nonnormative difference as the horizon of epistemological critique, aesthetic innovation, and political practice.' For Ferguson, no social group went as far as black lesbians in critiquing the gender and sexual formations that defined the normative confines of nationalist politics:

As women of color and black lesbian feminists invested racialized gender and sexual differences with negative potentials, they were actually opposing the logic of globalization, naming it as a new ground of exploitation *and* emergence. The negative articulation of categories such as 'lesbian,' 'coalition,' and 'difference' represented an attempt to cease appropriating culture to demonstrate the accoutrements of national identity — homogeneity, equivalence, normativity, and essence.

(Ferguson, 2004: 118)

In other words, insofar as nationalism disavows racialized and non-normative sexual and gender differences, black lesbian feminists negated forms of nationalism through their politicization of those differences. Their politics of difference was therefore not a struggle for mere respect or recognition, but rather a negation of the nationalist protocols of identity. In their analysis, the nationalist ideal of a singular, universal identity could only ever produce a false sense of unity, as it must rely on the suppression and regulation of non-normative difference. True coalitions and collaboration would only be achieved through an engagement with difference as ‘a dynamic human force, one which is enriching rather than threatening to the defined self’ (Lorde, 1978a: 35). One of the most well-known articulations of this politics of difference can be found in Audre Lorde’s essay ‘The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.’ Therein Lorde (1979c: 104-05) reflects: ‘As women, we have been taught either to ignore our differences, or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change. [...] But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.’ Lorde (1979b: 55) frequently specifies that the erasure of these differences must be understood as ‘derivatives of a larger contradiction between capital and labor.’ In the essay ‘Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,’ Lorde (1980: 108) maintains that the reason why ‘we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals,’ is because the rejection of racialized, gendered, and sexualized differences were necessary to capital’s production of surplus populations. In her own words: ‘Institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people.’

This reading of Audre Lorde in particular, and black lesbian feminism more broadly, applies the critique to all nationalist projects equally, liberal US state nationalism and revolutionary anti-colonial nationalism alike. Cheryl Higashida (2011: 8) has remarked critically upon this tendency to treat all nationalisms as equivalent in their enforcement of a homogeneous culture that entrenches and is entrenched by heteropatriarchy. She argues that, on the contrary, black lesbian feminists held Third World national liberation struggles to be indispensable to their liberation. She surveys the work of Francis Beal, Pat Parker, Audre Lorde, and others to show that the seventies black feminists did not jettison their support for national liberation struggles for self-determination throughout the world,



even as they extensively critiqued their investments in heteropatriarchal ideals (ibid.: 10-13). Returning to Audre Lorde, Higashida (ibid.: 137) claims that much scholarship treats her politics of difference as ‘largely unconnected to Third World struggles for national sovereignty.’ This selective engagement misses the extent to which ‘difference’ and ‘coalition,’ for Lorde, are in fact attained through anti-colonial nationalist struggle. Heeding Higashida’s call to bring this overshadowed or perhaps distorted aspect of black lesbian feminism into view, this final section places its writings on sexuality, identity, and eroticism together with its support for Third World and indigenous struggles for national sovereignty. It uncovers and probes the new meanings that emerge when the sexual politics of the black lesbian feminists is linked to their anti-imperialist consciousness.

### ***Imperialism and the production of difference***

Vladimir Lenin finished *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* in 1917, during his exile in Zurich, Switzerland. In this text, which followed Rosa Luxemburg’s groundbreaking study of imperialism in *The Accumulation of Capital* four years prior, Lenin develops a social theory that identifies imperialism as a new stage of capitalist development. He shows an acute awareness of how this stage overhauls and produces new forms of subjectivity in his theorization of the so-called labor aristocracy. Lenin (1917: 104) writes: ‘Imperialism [...] makes it economically possible to bribe the upper strata of the proletariat, and thereby fosters, gives shape to, and strengthens opportunism.’ Lenin is intent on showing how the exercise of imperialist power creates an opportunity for the bourgeoisie to bribe a section of the working class in the metropole. The upper layer of the proletariat can, in this respect, be said to benefit from imperialist profits. This labor aristocracy, in turn, is able to exercise disproportionate influence over the politics of the broader socialist movement. Lenin is arguing here that imperialism divides the proletariat in Western imperialist states. The labor aristocracy is placed in a contradictory class position — exploited by the bourgeoisie whilst itself becoming partly bourgeois. This section of the working class can either become ‘the labour lieutenants of the capitalist class, real vehicles of reformism and chauvinism’ *or* they can ally with the oppressed people of the

world (ibid.: 31). Its interests are therefore not determined. Due to its contradictory class location, there are multiple possible and legitimate construals of its interests, with or against imperialist powers. In short, Lenin's essay elucidates how imperialism produces real class differences and divisions within the metropole, undercutting internationalist solidarity by aligning certain members of the proletariat with the Western empire-building project. Imperialism both threatens to remove sections of the proletariat in Western imperialist societies from the ambit of revolutionary politics, whilst simultaneously bringing millions of people outside of Europe, who Frantz Fanon would later call the 'wretched of the Earth,' into its ambit. Adom Getachew (2019) has underscored the formative role that Lenin's text played for the anti-colonial nationalists of the twentieth century. She traces the various revisions, revivals, and elaborations of Lenin's theory of imperialism within the Pan-Africanist analyses of George Padmore, Kwame Nkrumah, and others, figuring their anti-colonial thought as a form of 'worldmaking.'

W. E. B. Du Bois, who was also deeply influential to Third World anti-colonial revolutionaries, was similarly concerned with imperialism's production and structuring of subjectivities within the imperial core. This focus is not only apparent in his notion of 'double-consciousness' — the contradiction of 'two warring ideals in one dark body' (Du Bois, 1903: 2) — but also in his account of the racial fragmentation of the US working class in terms of a global color line. Du Bois (1915: 235) understood the white working class's embrace of nationalism and militarism during the First World War to be inextricable from the expanding empire of the United States, which 'practically invited [the white American working class] to share in this new exploitation.' If white workers had instead built interracial proletarian solidarity, Du Bois implies, they could have permanently overthrown the Southern aristocracy and set the stage for an alliance with African and Asian nations that could have mounted a resistance to Western colonialism and imperialism (Kelley, 1999: 1068-69). Robin Kelley (ibid.: 1047) considers Du Bois's anti-imperialist consciousness an early instance of twentieth-century black historians' 'insistence on seeing African American and US history in global terms, of refusing to allow national boundaries to define their field of vision.' C. L. R. James was another historian who for Kelley exemplified this attempt to understand race through the history of imperialism and

international capital. However, Kelley (ibid.: 1075-77) maintains that it was not until the fifties that black scholarship, and the attendant global struggles for self-determination and freedom, fully developed a comprehensive vision of black internationalism. Within this era of decolonization, Angela Davis provided one of the clearest articulations of black Americans' embodiment of the imperialist nation-state's contradictions. Cynthia Young (2006: 190) has characterized Davis's theorization of black citizenship as an 'alienated form of national belonging,' a brutal yet disavowed exclusion upon which the US nation-state depended to resolve those contradictions. Her thesis of alienated belonging, Young (ibid.: 191) argues, 'served as a model for new forms of international affiliation and solidarity, an impetus for rethinking and transforming the US social order.' Angela Davis's physical distance from the US during her travels abroad mirrored her political divestment from foundational myths of the US nation-state. This vantage point, in other words, enabled her to gauge the juxtaposition of the white citizen against the racialized, alienated citizen as fundamental to the logics of US imperialism and to the extension of its global power. Young (ibid.: 200) further notes Davis's recognition that 'her identity as an American implicated her in the forms of oppression being exported across the globe.' Davis avoids a flattening or essentialization of blackness that would obscure the differences between those racialized populations who have (alienated) citizenship in the imperial core and those who suffer the violence of US empire. Her materialist analysis recognizes that even as black Americans are ghettoized within an internal colony, their proximity to the US nation-state nonetheless protects them from the imperial subjugation that racialized populations in the Third World experience. The parallels between Lenin's account of the labor aristocracy's contradictory class position and Davis's account of the relative privileges bestowed upon black Americans like herself, both located within their critique of imperialist expansion, are striking.

One remarkable application of this anti-imperialist approach is found within the 1973 black feminist publication *Lessons from the Damned*. The authors, who refer to themselves anonymously as 'The Damned,' detail the post-war emergence of a 'negro bourgeoisie' and a 'black petit-bourgeoisie' in the US. The newly formed black bourgeois class is described as 'a stupid class that imitates the white bourgeoisie' yet has no access to the means of production (The Damned, 1973: 23). This fracturing of

the material basis for solidarity amongst black Americans is the direct result of the imperialist domination of former colonies. The Damned (ibid.: 27) explain: ‘The loot from hustling Europe and ripping-off Asia and Africa filtered down through all the class layers and ethnic groups, finally getting to us poor blacks. We got welfare, some housing, a few more jobs, a little college and some of us “got to be somebody.”’ And, just as Lenin warned of the labor aristocracy’s undue influence within the working-class movement, the authors of *Lessons from the Damned* decry the power of the black petit-bourgeoisie within the black movement of the sixties. Their class position meant that they ‘hoped and dreamed that they could replace some of the white bourgeoisie’ and misunderstood the US nation-state’s ‘world-wide base of exploitation.’ The book claims a Marxist-Leninist analysis that draws inspiration from Kwame Nkrumah’s *Class Struggle in Africa*. Similar analyses are found within the Third World Women’s Alliance’s newspaper, *Triple Jeopardy*, where the conditions of black women’s lives in the US are regularly connected to their global implications. In one satirical piece, for example, the magazine parodies a television commercial for Tetley Tea by having saleswomen from numerous Third World countries detail the corporation’s extraction of their natural resources and exploitation of their workers (Third World Women’s Alliance, 1973: 13). These contributions to the magazine shed light on the readers’ complicity in US imperialism by virtue of being situated within the imperial core and enjoined them to ally themselves with Third World women who suffer the most at its hands.

### ***The eroticism of anti-imperialist struggle***

This tradition of anti-imperialist theorizing is carried forward within the black lesbian feminism of the late seventies and early eighties. Audre Lorde attests to this intellectual continuity in her essay ‘Learning from the 60s,’ in which she considers the lessons of Black Power nationalism and reckons with the continued urgency of Third World national liberation. She affirms in this essay that ‘there are no new ideas, just new ways of giving those ideas we cherish breath and power in our living,’ and postulates that, had Malcolm X not been assassinated, he would have been led ‘into inevitable confrontation with the question of difference as a creative and necessary force of change’ (Lorde, 1982:

129-30). In these years, Lorde developed friendships with feminist activists and writers within the anti-apartheid movement, such as the leading South African revolutionary Ellen Kuzwayo, through groups like the Sisterhood in Support of Sisters in South Africa and the Zamani Soweto Sisters. In these years she also established links with struggles for Maori and aboriginal self-determination in New Zealand and Australia respectively (Higashida, 2011: 139). She brought these alliances and experiences to bear on her engagements with questions of racial, gender, and sexual liberation in the US. A number of her essays, including 'Grenada Revisited' and 'Apartheid USA,' as well as poems like 'Equal Opportunity,' reveal the centrality of anti-imperialist internationalism, socialism, and national self-determination to her thought and practice.

Audre Lorde traveled to Grenada, her parents' birthplace, for the first time in 1978. At that point, the island nation was under the 'wasteful, corrupt, and United States sanctioned' regime of Sir Eric Gairy (Lorde, 1983: 174). One year later, it was overthrown by the New Jewel Movement that was led by the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary Maurice Bishop. In 1983, US President Ronald Reagan launched an invasion of Grenada and installed an interim government. Lorde revisited Grenada shortly after the US invasion and felt compelled to write the essay 'Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report.' In this essay, Lorde (*ibid.*) is at pains to illustrate how dramatically the Grenadian people's quality of life improved while the People's Revolutionary Government was in power between 1979 and 1983 and to expose 'the lies and distortions of secrecy surrounding the invasion.' She outlines the deleterious (and gendered) effects of imperialism on Grenadian society, foregrounding how the IMF's neoliberal restructuring of the country's economy — 'administered under US guns' (*ibid.*: 176) — undermines the self-determination of the Grenadian people and facilitates their exploitation. Lorde (*ibid.*: 178) asks: 'How soon will it be Grenadian women who are going blind from assembling microcomputer chips at \$0.80 an hour for international industrial corporations?'

According to Jack Turner (2021: 248), this essay places Audre Lorde alongside the thinkers whose anti-colonial nationalist discourse was critically inspired by Lenin's account of imperialism and has been characterized by Adom Getachew as a worldmaking activity: Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, George Padmore, and Eric Williams. Lorde's portrait of the US invasion of Grenada, Turner

(ibid.: 244) writes, highlights it as ‘a window onto larger anxieties of American national identity [...] and the imperial spirit of a nation that refused to acknowledge itself as an empire.’ Indeed, Lorde (1983: 177) refuses to delink ‘the rape and annexation of tiny Black Grenada’ from the ‘facts of American life and racism.’ She also insists that the US invasion of Grenada is ‘the same racism’ that drives US foreign policies in other Caribbean islands and in Vietnam, and ‘it is the same racism that keeps american eyes turned aside from the corrosive apartheid eating like acid into the face of White South Africa.’

Lorde’s internationalist consciousness again does not erase the differences between black Americans and Grenadians. Adopting a characteristically reflexive stance, Lorde (ibid.: 186) acknowledges the relative privilege that accrues from her position within the imperial core: ‘Grenada is their country. I am only a relative. I must listen long and hard and ponder the implications of what I have heard, or be guilty of the same quick arrogance of the US government in believing there are external solutions to Grenada’s future.’ Lorde is clear that this reflexive exercise does not create distance between herself and the Grenadian people, but rather reinforces transnational identification and solidarity. It is, on the contrary, the absence of reflexive awareness that leads black Americans to succumb to the trappings of national identification. ‘With the constant manipulation of the media,’ Lorde (ibid.: 181) observes, ‘many Black americans are honestly confused, defending “our” invasion of Black Grenada under a mistaken mirage of patriotism.’ At its most insidious, the Pentagon is able to exploit this mistaken mirage of patriotism by enlisting ‘Black American soldiers [...] to fire upon other Black people’ (ibid.: 180). In other words, when black Americans fail to perceive their fates as linked to the situation of black people abroad, they uncritically perpetuate imperialist power. This comes back to haunt them. Lorde (ibid.: 181) claims that imperialist acts of aggression abroad should serve as a warning at home: ‘We did it to them down there and we will not hesitate to do it to you.’ At the crux of Lorde’s essay lies the insight that, whilst the privileges that citizenship bestows upon black Americans can temporarily lead them to disidentify with the black subjects of US empire abroad, it also morally compels them to resist US imperialism and grants them leverage to do so.

The main theme of her poem 'Equal Opportunity' is similarly the contradictory position of black Americans under imperialism. The poem's black female protagonist is the 'american deputy assistant secretary of defense / for Equal Opportunity / and safety' who achieves upward mobility and respectability through her participation in the violent US invasion of Grenada (Lorde, 1988: 440). Her decision to prop up the US military system in pursuit of her own professional advancement leads her to violate any solidarity with racialized populations elsewhere. She 'swims toward safety / through a lake of her own blood' (ibid.: 442). These lines, Turner (2021: 245) notes, illustrate how '[t]he militarized boundaries of US national identity sever not only the character's human identification with the subjects of the invasion,' but also the transnational political solidarity with the subjects of imperialist aggression more generally. This poem functions as an injunction to reflexivity — that is, as an appeal to the readers to interrogate their complicities with US empire, and as an incitement to greater identification with the victims of imperialist domination. It is therefore concerned with the same tension that Angela Davis and the black feminist authors of *Lessons of the Damned* identified, namely, that US empire's systematic subjugation and devaluation of racialized populations at home and abroad does not preclude racialized Americans' participation in that same project of empire. The cultivation of transnational, anti-imperialist solidarity requires wrestling with black Americans' contradictory position as both (conditional) beneficiaries *and* victims of imperialist predation. Lorde (1988: 440) captures the differences and divisions between black people in the metropole and periphery with evocative imagery: 'Blindness slashes our tapestry to shreds.' The Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense's blindness, a social and spiritual impoverishment that stems from a disavowal of her ties to black people struggling for freedom globally, is the price that she pays for placing personal ambitions within the hierarchical US military order over transnational solidarity with the Grenadian people.

Similar themes are found within the writings of the renowned black feminist Pat Parker. She came out as a lesbian in the late sixties, after two short marriages with the Black Panther Party's Minister of Culture Ed Bullins and the writer Robert F. Parker. Audre Lorde and Pat Parker first met in 1969 and collaborated until Parker's death in 1989. During this period, she worked for the Oakland

Feminist Women's Health Center, the Black Women's Revolutionary Council, and the Women's Press Collective (Washburn, 2015: 308-09). In her essay 'Revolution: It's Not Neat or Pretty or Quick,' Parker (1980: 238) attempts to develop a clear account of imperialism 'and how it manifests itself in our lives.' She begins by clarifying her relative situational privilege as someone residing in the United States, stating that '[t]he rest of the world is being exploited in order to maintain our standard of living.' This presents black Americans with numerous and contradictory construals of their interests. They can be allured by the spoils of imperialism and therefore become implicated in the devastation and immiseration that it sends tearing across the continents, or they can join the fight 'to destroy all imperialist governments,' even as doing so would 'drastically alter' their conditions of life within the US (ibid.: 238-39). For Parker, only the latter is truly liberatory as racialized groups ultimately have more in common with one another than with their imperial masters. A disidentification with the US nation-state, and a refusal of the bribes that its empire offers, is hence required of black Americans:

The equation is being laid out in front of us. Good American equals Support Imperialism and war. To this, I must declare — I am not a good American. I do not wish to have the world colonized, bombarded and plundered in order to eat steak. Each time a national liberation victory is won I applaud and support it. It means we are one step closer to ending the madness that we live under. It means we weaken the chains that are binding the world.

(Parker, 1980: 239-40)

This reflexive awareness of what the Combahee River Collective (1977: 212) refers to as 'the contemporary economic and political position of black people' positions these black lesbian feminists ideologically and politically as the inheritors of a twentieth-century tradition of anti-imperialist theorizing. Tamara Lea Spira (2014) has uncovered this strand of transnational feminist analysis in the partially eclipsed history of 'Third World' queer transnational feminist solidarity with Chile. Recounting a specific poetry reading at San Francisco's Glide Memorial Church, organized in opposition to the 1973 coup in Chile, Spira conducts a close reading of Pamela Donnegan and Janice



Mirikitani's poetry. Both performers implicate citizens of the US within the global violence of Western imperialism. Donnegan speaks of the coercion of black Americans 'into internalising a system reliant upon their own subjugation' (ibid.: 132), expressing this dissonance in the lines, 'We are blues people sleeping in a nation naked awakening / Blues people sleeping in a nation where blood drips from the lips of liberty' (as quoted in Spira, 2014: 132). And Mirikitani (1978) describes the effects of imperial violence in 'distant' areas as always boomeranging back against black Americans, as 'worms / crawling beneath / our living skin.' Capturing US imperialism's production of irreconcilable differences and contradictory class interests within the imperial core, Mirikitani emphasized that those with US citizenship could not fully absolve themselves from their participation in empire building. Forming an anti-imperialist constituency that was in solidarity with the Chilean people 'would therefore not be optional for one's own political and spiritual survival: it would be imperative' (Spira, 2014: 134).

The sexual politics of these feminists has conventionally been siphoned off from their anti-imperialist commitments. This is a mistake. For the black lesbian feminists of the seventies and eighties, it was clear that love, pleasure, eroticism, and sexual liberation could not be achieved amongst women who affirm the imperialist order. When their writings on sexuality are read as inextricable from their anti-imperialist consciousness, they acquire new meanings. My argument is that black lesbian feminists aimed to undermine the notion that there is a private sphere that concerns 'sexuality' which exists separately from, logically prior to, or outside of the history of Western imperialism. They clarified that, to the extent that anti-imperialists do not take sexual politics into account, they risk committing a form of reductionism as they imagine the transition from capitalist imperialism to socialism as merely an economic and/or political transition that leaves the protected institutions of domesticity and privacy intact. For the black lesbian feminists, a total transformation of the current imperialist order would necessarily entail a transformation of sexual relations. By using their poetry and prose to fuse personal and political sites of resistance — or, more accurately, to show that the so-called 'personal' sites of resistance are irreducibly political — black lesbian feminists sought to radicalize and generalize anti-imperialist struggle.

The black lesbian essayist Cheryl Clarke's contribution to *This Bridge Called My Back*, 'Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance,' is perhaps one of the most lucid elaborations of the position that a radical lesbian sexual politics can 'reverse the heterosexual imperialism of male culture' (Clarke, 1981: 126). Her definition of lesbianism acknowledges the various manifestations of lesbian relationships, behaviors, and experiences. She explains that she does not intend to 'reify lesbianism,' but rather to clarify the potential for 'lesbian-feminism' to transform the sexual politics of the Western imperial order (ibid.: 132). As such, she conceives of lesbianism as a political act of resistance that reaches beyond the confines of the culturally sanctioned 'private' sphere of bourgeois domesticity. Writes Clarke (ibid.): '*[A]ll people struggling to transform the character of relationships in this culture have something to learn from lesbians.*' What is this character? Clarke understands existing sexual relations to be constituted by the workings of Western imperialist power. She contends that the profitability of women's subjugation and alienation within heterosexual relationships is reflective of the profitability of the North Atlantic slave trade, stating that heterosexual politics 'mirror the exploitative, class-bound relationship between the white slave master and the African slave' (ibid.: 129). Within the West, she notes, this imperialist sexual politics also creates divisions amongst black people. Placing the masculinist ideology of black liberation politics within this imperialist frame, she writes that the heteronormative prescriptions of Western society are 'upheld by many black people, especially black men, as the most desired state of affairs between men and women.' Clarke (ibid.: 131) continues: 'The black man [...] is accorded native elite or colonial guard or vigilante status over black women in imperialist patriarchy. He is an overseer for the slave master.' Her anti-imperialist analysis reveals how the very imperialist power that subjugates the black man within the metropole simultaneously conscripts him into its service. Crucially, it does so by bribing him with heteropatriarchal privileges, by pledging to him dominion over black women. The lesbian is hence described as having resisted 'the slave master's imperialism in that one sphere of her life' and as having 'decolonized her body.' In short, a lesbian feminist sexual politics is presented as exploding the divisions and differences that are engendered by imperialist expansion.

The use of a metaphoric of colonialism to explicate Western sexual relations can also be found in Audre Lorde's (1978b: 44) essay 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,' in which women's subordination is analogized to the way that 'ants maintain colonies of aphids to provide a life-giving substance for their masters.' When read in light of her anti-imperialist internationalism, Lorde's notion of 'the erotic' appears as a strategy for overcoming the sexual and racial differences that are produced under an imperialist global order. The battle against Western imperialism becomes the principal base for validating 'the erotic.' Once again critiquing the treatment of sexual politics as belonging to a 'private' or 'personal' locus of liberation, Lorde (ibid.: 47) comments that the erotic 'is so feared, and so often relegated to the bedroom alone.' If this domestication of the erotic were resisted, Lorde (ibid.: 46) suggests, we would recognize it as 'the first and most powerful guiding light towards any understanding.' She continues:

The erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge. The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of difference. [...] Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives.

(Lorde, 1978b: 46-47)

In these passages, Lorde (ibid.: 45) presents the erotic as the process through which reflexive awareness of the differences that are created by a system that 'defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need' is achieved. Reading this essay alongside her writings on the centrality of self-determination and anti-imperialism to the liberation of black women, we might construe the erotic as the antidote to the 'blindness' or spiritual impoverishment that befell the Deputy Assistant Secretary

of Defense in her poem 'Equal Opportunity;' in other words, as a powerful source of guidance through which one comes to consciousness about the differences that are cultivated amongst oppressed people under an imperialist global order. In a similar vein, Cherríe Moraga (1979: 23) would one year later characterize lesbianism as 'the avenue through which I have learned the most about silence and oppression.' Lorde's description of lesbian sexual politics as a sharing of physical, emotional, psychic, and intellectual joy that diminishes the threat of difference posits it as a collective project of comradesly trust, humility, vulnerability, and mutuality; an exhilarating and enlightening process that dissolves the boundaries of bourgeois privacy, property, and domesticity. In a word, it is *erotic*.

It is through the struggle against the suppression of the erotic that the black feminist politics of difference can be achieved. A glimpse of how this eroticized human life could be fulfilled can be found in later writings, like the essay 'Turning the Beat Around: Lesbian Parenting 1986' and the poem 'Sisters in Arms.' Cheryl Higashida (2011: 146-53) has offered a detailed discussion of these two pieces. In the former, Lorde draws lessons about the challenges and responsibilities of lesbian and gay parenting from the 1976 Soweto uprisings led by black South African schoolchildren. The latter similarly makes national self-determination and anti-imperialist struggle fundamental to her understanding of sexual and familial relations, exploring the contradictory relationship between a black woman from the US and a South African revolutionary who loses her daughter to the violence of the apartheid state. Taken together, these writings demonstrate that, for Lorde, the horizons of a liberatory sexual politics must be grounded in anti-colonial internationalism and thus 'cannot be shunted off to the realm of the private' (ibid.: 148). Sexuality is continuous with, *not* cordoned off from, the imperial. These writings enjoin the reader to reflect on the range of levels that US imperialism is entwined with racialized sexual oppression, and to recalibrate the coordinates of both anti-imperialist struggle and sexual politics accordingly.

## Conclusion

This chapter has sought to intervene into the domestication of the seventies US black feminist movement. The dominant rendering of the movement as a self-defensive reaction to the sexism of the black movement and the racism of the women's movement delinks it from its profoundly internationalist foundations and from a history of transnational feminist solidarity. More specifically, this chapter has shown that a consideration of the historically occluded relationships between US black feminists and the Third World anti-colonial struggles of the time disrupts two widespread misconceptions about the sexual politics of the black feminist movement. First is the notion that the black feminists of the early seventies were mainly preoccupied with questions of race and gender, a preoccupation which ultimately produced a blind spot regarding the question of sexuality. While it is true that the political climate of those years presented many obstacles to the development of an avowedly lesbian standpoint within black feminist organizations, it did not necessarily lead to an acceptance of heterosexist attitudes. On the contrary, critiques of the racialized prescriptions of heteronormative life loomed large within the writings of black feminist activists in these years. Significantly, their accounts of the white supremacist roots of the state's regulation of non-heteronormative social formations frequently foregrounded the role of capitalist imperialism in the imposition of a binaristic gender and sexual order. In other words, they placed the pathologization of black family life in the larger history of imperialism's obliteration of non-Western, non-white forms of kinship and belonging.

The second historiographical tendency that this chapter challenged is the insulation of black lesbian writing on eroticism, sexuality, and desire from the literature on anti-imperialism, national self-determination, and transnational feminist solidarity. The black lesbian feminist writings of the late seventies and early eighties advanced a tradition of anti-imperialist theorizing that probed imperialism's reorganization of subjectivity within the imperial core. This tradition, which can be traced back to Lenin and Du Bois, sought to elucidate how imperialist expansion engendered irreconcilable differences amongst the revolutionary classes of Western countries. It thereby obscured the common fate shared by oppressed people, now stratified along the axes of race, sexuality, and gender. This anti-imperialist perspective enabled the black lesbian feminists to explain the hold of heteropatriarchal

and masculinist ideology on the black liberation movement and led them to identify eroticism and lesbianism as potentially revolutionary acts that could undo the mystification of their shared interests with one another and with racialized subjects abroad. It also allowed them to overcome the limitations of gay liberationism's vision of a liberated sexuality, which had failed to account for the intimate ties between white supremacy and the prescriptions of heteronormativity, and more closely align the black feminist movement with struggles for sexual liberation.

Without reading the black lesbian feminist texts on sexual politics and anti-imperialism together, we risk re-committing the very mistake that the black lesbian feminists sought to overcome, namely, the relegation of sexuality and eroticism to the bourgeois domestic sphere. A transnational renarrativization of the black feminist movement reveals the centrality of anti-imperialist consciousness to its analysis of sexuality. The multiple forms of gendered, racial, and sexual domination intersected and congealed, in their assessment, through the advancement of a global system of capitalist imperialism.

### **III. Politicizing sex: The resistance politics of the AIDS activist movement**

It was not until 1984 that the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) was identified as the cause of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). Throughout the seventies, HIV/AIDS was present within uninsured, poor and homeless, often racialized populations, especially amongst intravenous drug users and sex workers. The rise of urban poverty, the collapse of the social insurance system, and the burgeoning crack and heroin epidemics had created ideal conditions for the transmission of the virus. It was not until a sufficient number of middle-class gay men with access to premium health care became infected in the early eighties that HIV/AIDS became recognizable to medical practitioners and the wider public. There was therefore a ‘shadow’ epidemic that was profoundly obscured by the dominant epidemiological profile of the AIDS crisis (Cooper, 2017: 203-05). These differentials have characterized HIV/AIDS ever since. By early January 1985, the majority of people diagnosed with AIDS in New York were non-white. In 1988 this was true for the country as a whole (Crewe, 2018). Today, around thirteen thousand people in the United States still die of AIDS each year, and the rates of HIV transmission amongst Black gay men in the American South are the highest in the world (Schulman, 2021: xxii).

In the eighties, due to the absence of any systematic federal, state, or city responses to the emerging epidemic, volunteer groups such as the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) formed to provide care and housing to patients (Carroll, 2015: 139). The mobilization of gays and lesbians around HIV/AIDS radicalized in the second half of the decade. This occurred within a wider political context. Over the course of the eighties, new leftist coalitions were being forged between gay and lesbian activists and pro-sex feminists, union workers, radical democrats, and anti-racist organizers within grassroots struggles around prisons, homelessness, health care, disability, and militarism. Within these variegated movements, gay and lesbian activists were integrated and supported at unprecedented levels (Stein, 2012: 146-47). Civil rights leader Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition — a phrase

appropriated from Fred Hampton of the Black Panther Party — became a coalescing force for a diverse and broad oppositional politics (Edwards, 2000: 491). It provided the strategic setting for reinvigorated lesbian and gay street activism and sustained mass protest activity until at least until 1989, when Jackson began to turn his back on his campaign's grassroots base in an attempt to ingratiate himself with the political establishment (ibid.: 496). The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (Act Up) was launched within this context.

Act Up was an AIDS activist group that carried out constant loud, large, public acts of civil disobedience and disruptive collective action to bring attention to issues regarding the AIDS epidemic, targeting pharmaceutical industries, government authorities such as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the Catholic Church, real estate developers like Donald Trump, and the media (Carroll, 2015: 133-34). Act Up won significant policy victories during its most active years of 1987 to 1992. It was organized horizontally, with no formal structures, spokespeople, or elected leaders and a number of standing committees that represented particular groups within the organization. Act Up-NY's weekly Monday meetings had a regular attendance of hundreds of people, often up to 800 (Rimmerman, 2015: 54). The group's first protest, held on Wall Street in March 1987, successfully captured the media's attention. This action was directed at the profiteering of Burroughs Wellcome, a drug company that was charging an exorbitant sum for the AIDS drug AZT (ibid.: 56). At the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights in October later that year, the AIDS Coalition to Network, Organize, and Win (Act Now) was formed as a national association of AIDS activist groups across the US (Stein, 2012: 158).

Act Up's membership was predominantly white and male. Nevertheless, many gay activists were deeply moved by the number of lesbians and straight women — many of whom were experienced reproductive rights activists — that became involved in Act Up as organizers, carers, and educators. Alliances with trans activists were also forged, especially within safer sex campaigns like the San Francisco-based Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence (ibid.: 149-50). The New York branch of Act Up established a predominantly non-white Majority Action Committee and a Women's Caucus, both of which expanded the organization's focus beyond medical treatment to structural issues — that is, how



racial, gender, and class stratifications shaped the epidemic — and communities that were underrepresented within mainstream AIDS activism, including intravenous drug users, prisoners, sex workers, women, migrants, and children with AIDS (Carroll, 2015: 145-46). There was also a large number of Jewish members within Act Up-NY. Act Up chapters across the US had their own equivalent of the Women’s Caucus and the Majority Action Committee, such as Act Up-LA’s People of Color Coalition (Stein, 2012: 159). As Schulman (2021: xxiii) writes, countless women, people of color, and poor members of Act Up dedicated ‘their entire waking lives to the movement.’ Melinda Cooper (2017: 207) has noted that widespread references to the middle-class status of many Act Up members can also be misleading. A large proportion of gay men in Act Up were uninsured and employed in feminized, often temporary work, and, regardless of class background, white gay men faced numerous insecurities due to their HIV status or sexual orientation. They risked being evicted from their homes, fired from their jobs, denied credit, ostracized by their families and friends, and deprived of health care. Even affluent gay men could therefore suddenly be exposed to unemployment, poverty, homelessness, and social isolation.

In the years following its creation in New York City, Act Up spread rapidly across the globe, sprouting in 147 cities (Carroll, 2015: 133). Outside of the US, Act Up experienced its greatest success in France (Broqua, 2015: 64). Act Up-Paris was founded in 1989 under strikingly similar conditions (government silence and inaction, police repression, and comparable disease demographics) and adopted many of Act Up-NY’s disruptive activist tactics (zaps, die-ins, public performances) and symbols and slogans (the pink triangle, ‘Silence = Death,’ ‘Anger = Action’). The founder of Act Up-Paris, Didier Lestrade, had traveled to New York as a journalist numerous times in the late eighties, and the president of Act Up-Paris in the mid-nineties, Christophe Martet, had been a member of Act Up-NY a few years prior (Ernst, 1997: 22-24). Many Act Up-Paris members had been militants during the Algerian War of Independence and in New Left groups including the Front Homosexuel D’Action Révolutionnaire (FHAR) (Dard-Dascot, 2012: 79).

The chapter explores the multi-sited resistance politics of the AIDS activist movement. It demonstrates that AIDS activists correctly understood various health, economic, political, and cultural

issues as linked via the ascending neoliberalism of the eighties and nineties. As Tamar Carroll (2015: 136) argues, members of radical AIDS activist groups ‘cared as much about opposing neoliberal reforms as they did about developing better AIDS treatments.’ When, however, their opposition to neoliberal reforms is narrated within a narrow nation-based framework, our understanding of the history of groups like Act Up is fatefully foreshortened. The first section highlights the transnational activities, coalitions, and orientations that the AIDS activist movement developed during its peak years, demonstrating how queer radicals were able to link anti-militarism, anti-border politics, and sexual liberation through their AIDS activism. The movement’s resistance politics was forged in response to affairs at various geopolitical sites, from the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua to US war in the Gulf. The second section of the chapter shifts focus to AIDS activism’s defense of queer urban sexual cultures at home. This struggle articulated safer sex and the refusal of monogamy and abstinence as continuous with a politics of resistance to neoliberal privatization and gentrification. The final two sections then turn to the burgeoning field of queer theory. They argue that the queer academic texts of this period had a more ambiguous relationship to the development of neoliberalism and assesses the extent to which they extended or enfeebled the resistance politics of the AIDS activist movement.

### The multiple fronts of the AIDS activist movement

Numerous historians have noted that the activist knowledges that shaped Act Up’s organizational structure and protest actions were provided by members who were veterans of earlier social movements, including the women’s liberation movement, Vietnam War protests, gay and lesbian liberationism, radical performance groups like the Yippies, student movements in Central America, civil rights organizations, the Black Power movement, and the May 19 Communist Coalition, an organization formed by former members of the Weathermen Underground and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) (Carroll, 2015: 136-38; Schulman, 2021: 15). Their zap actions and other acts of civil disobedience were copied from the Gay Liberation Front, and the movement was directly influenced by the black feminist movement’s fight against sterilization abuse and other coercive

medical interventions (Schulman, 2021: 15). Act Up's memorable political funeral actions were inspired by the South African anti-apartheid struggle (Sawyer, 2002: 92), and some members even organized a Gay and Lesbian Freedom Ride through the US South in an attempt to emulate the spirit of the Civil Rights movement (Pincus, 1988: 1). Act Up member Bob Kohler (2002: 127) had worked with the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), was present at the Stonewall Riots, and had become involved with the Gay Liberation Front and the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries. Kiyoshi Kuromiya, who we encountered in a previous chapter as co-founder of GLF-Philadelphia, also joined Act Up alongside Ortez Alderson, with whom he had attended the Black Panther Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention in 1970 (Gossett, 2014: 36-37). Nevertheless, the experience of many black gay men continued to be one of political and social isolation from the gay and lesbian movement. Kevin J. Mumford (2016: 125-26) has explained that, while groups like the National Black Feminist Organization and the Combahee River Collective enabled the production of new critical knowledges and activist circles for black lesbian feminist writers, the path to establishing similar networks and coalitions was rockier for black gay men — in large part due to the AIDS crisis. Mumford (*ibid.*: 125-70) shares the stories of two men, Joseph Beam and James Tinney, who throughout their lives were sustained by their personal and intellectual relationships with black feminist writers like Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and Barbara Smith, yet had profoundly fraught relationships with the gay and lesbian activism of their time.

As with the historiographical literature on the gay liberation movement and black lesbian feminism, most research on AIDS activism narrates the history of groups like Act Up within a domestic, nation-based framework. This scholarship misses how the multi-sited nature of AIDS activism produced a distinctly transnational consciousness amongst radical members of the movement, as they repeatedly encountered and confronted sites of neoliberal restructuring. To the extent that Act Up is placed within the context of neoliberal globalization, this occurs almost exclusively in relation to the Housing Committee's fight for affordable housing at a time when homelessness was rapidly increasing and real estate was becoming prohibitively expensive. The Committee's most memorable demonstration was the occupation of Trump Tower on Thanksgiving of 1988 that aimed to draw the

connections between tax-subsidized real estate development, gentrification, and privatization on the one hand, and record numbers of homelessness on the other (Carroll, 2015: 146-48; Cooper, 2017: 199-200; Schulman, 2021: 482-504). This section draws on archival sources and anti-canonical secondary literature to highlight alternative understudied sites of radical AIDS activism that reveal its transnational connections and outlook.

A transnational story of the AIDS activist movement might begin with the Nicaraguan Revolution. In 1979, the Sandinista National Liberation Front took power over the country after mounting a military offensive against the dictatorship of Nicaraguan general Anastasio Somoza Debayle and swiftly instituted a socialist program. In an illustrative case of the lengths to which the United States went to achieve regime change in states that refused to implement neoliberal reforms of deregulation, privatization, and liberalization, in the early eighties the Regan administration began funding and training counter-revolutionary forces known as the Contras in violation of international law. In 1984, the CIA then mined three Nicaraguan harbors and guided bomb attacks at the outpost of La Penca. During these same years, the Reagan administration also approved economic and military assistance to the Salvadoran government in its war against the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, as well as to the dictator Efraín Ríos Montt who oversaw a genocide campaign against the Maya population of Guatemala (Hobson, 2016: 99-101). Emily K. Hobson (ibid.: 97-154) has provided a thorough account of how San Francisco, home to the largest Nicaraguan exile community in the US, became a hub of the Nicaraguan solidarity movement, as various communities — queers, radicals, Central American exiles, migrants — intersected and built anti-imperialist solidarity networks. Hobson (ibid.: 98) writes: ‘Lesbians and gay radicals were inspired by the Mission District’s barrio transnationalism to embed sexual liberation in broader radical change.’

In 1979, Gay People for the Nicaraguan Revolution (GPNR) was born to support the liberation movements of Central America and oppose US intervention. In the mid-eighties, gay radicals and lesbians of color planned brigades to Nicaragua — inspired by the Venceremos Brigades to Cuba yet hopeful that the Sandinistas would be more welcoming of them than the Cuban government had been (ibid.: 108). The radical newspaper *Gay Community News* ran articles about the brigades in

which participants declared that the US, via international institutions like the Inter-American Development Bank, was ‘literally starving this country’ (Hayes, 1984: 12) and treating it ‘as its personal property to rape and pillage’ (Kyper, 1984: 13). One trip was organized by Somon Hermanas, an offshoot of the Third World Women’s Alliance, and the delegation’s stories sparked discussions among black lesbian feminists like Barbara Smith about how to best reconcile socialism, sexual freedom, and cultural difference (Hobson, 2016: 129-30). When in May 1987 the Sandinista Ministry of Health began developing an AIDS-prevention program, the lesbian and gay solidarity activists too shifted their focus to AIDS. Many members of the lesbian and gay solidarity movement, several of whom had been active in the Committee for Health Rights in Central America, entered AIDS activism, and some health workers even traveled to Nicaragua to receive training (ibid.: 142-43).

Hobson (ibid.: 155-85) shows that the Central American and AIDS solidarity movements in the Bay Area were often tied together through a politics of anti-militarism. She relates numerous stories, including that of gay activists from the Central American solidarity movement who in 1984 poured fake blood outside a national nuclear weapons laboratory to protest the allocation of funding for the arms race rather than for AIDS research; and of John Lorenzini, the mentee of a Central American solidarity protester, who chained himself to the doors of the US Department of Health and Human Services in San Francisco to draw attention to government inaction (ibid.: 155). Hobson (ibid.: 157) explains that many San Francisco-based AIDS activist groups, including Citizens for Medical Justice (CMJ) and AIDS Action Pledge, were inspired by and modeled on the Pledge of Resistance, an organization that was established in opposition to the US invasion of Grenada. In 1986, these groups joined together at the Concord Naval Weapons Station to block an arms shipment to El Salvador. The protesters carried two coffins labeled ‘Killed By Contra Terror’ and ‘Killed By AIDS’ (ibid.: 164). At such actions, activists would chant slogans that drew direct links between the US state’s imperialist interventions abroad and inaction on AIDS at home: ‘Money for AIDS, not war,’ ‘Fight AIDS, not Nicaragua,’ ‘Fund condoms, not Contras,’ ‘Health care — not Contra aid,’ ‘Quarantine the war machine, not people with AIDS,’ and ‘We’re dykes and faggots and we’re here to say, down with the army and the CIA.’ Hobson (ibid. 175) concludes: ‘Tying AIDS to Central America [...] helped to

remake the meaning of the epidemic, shifting it from a problem of pathology or deviance to one of the “human needs” that might be met by cutting the military budget.’

A few years later, a new geopolitical context rekindled anti-militarism and created new coalitions between queer radicals and anti-war activists: the 1991 Gulf War (Roth, 2017: 54-55). AIDS groups across the country staged protest actions against the war effort, exposing the contradiction between the state’s drastic cuts to health services on the one hand and exorbitant military and defense spending on the other. Act Up’s influential magazine *Outweek* published multiple articles detailing the dramatic anti-war actions of Act Up chapters on both sides of the US. In New York City, Act Up members stormed the studios of the nation’s largest news broadcasters, including CBS and NBC, chanting ‘Money for AIDS, not for war’ and carrying banners that said ‘Fight AIDS, not Arabs’ (Reyes, 1991: 13; Schulman, 2021: 553-55). On the following day, dubbed the Day of Desperation, Act Up coordinated multiple acts of civil disobedience. Activists blocked traffic in Harlem and hung banners across the East River Drive (Reyes, 1991: 12). These actions culminated during rush hour inside Grand Central Station. Signs displaying the number of AIDS deaths were draped along the train departures board, and helium balloons suspended a banner that read ‘Money for AIDS, not for War’ from the terminal’s ceiling (Schulman, 2021: 557). Act Up ran a paid ad in *The New York Times* on the Day of Desperation highlighting that ‘the US government has been able to house, feed and provide health care for a half-million troops in the middle of the desert, while they can’t liberate enough money for the Ryan White AIDS CARE bill’ (Goff, 1991: 58). Over 300 people were arrested for their participation in protest actions that day (Reyes, 1991: 15). In San Francisco, anti-war protests led to the arrests of over 1,000 people, a record for the city (White, 1991b: 16).

In the reportage, lesbian and gay activists are routinely characterized as the vanguard of the anti-Gulf War protests, reflecting the greater integration of queer radicals within leftist activism during this period than during the gay liberation era of the late sixties. In a piece for *Outweek*, Allen White (1991a: 20, 22) cited the activist and historian Jonathan Katz declaring that ‘we are the cutting-edge radical movement of the ’90s,’ and politician Harry Britt claiming that ‘the lesbian and gay community is possibly the most powerful progressive urban constituency in the United States.’ Elsewhere, he

quoted a protester predicting that '[t]he leaders of this anti-war movement will come out of the gay movement' (White, 1991b: 24). These queer activists linked the AIDS crisis to the war effort on many levels. They drew contrasts between the extensive media coverage and political speeches in support of the Gulf War, and the silence that victims of the AIDS epidemic faced. Michael Goff (1991: 82) wrote in an *Outweek* article: 'We couldn't wait a few months to see if sanctions would work, but we could wait five years for our president to mention the word AIDS.' These activist journalists also repeatedly warned that the financing and staffing of the war effort might lead to funding restrictions on federal AIDS programs and create further shortages among laboratory technicians and health care professionals (O'Neill, 1991: 24-25).

These critiques evince political differences among the anti-war activists. While some advocated for the imposition of sanctions — a position that, despite its anti-militarism, was nonetheless confident in the US state's capacity to achieve a resolution of the conflict through the exertion of economic power — others consciously asserted an anti-imperialist position, situating their critique within the tradition of US anti-imperialism. *Outweek's* reportage explained the origins of the Gulf War in terms of 'the enforcement of arbitrarily drawn borders and the propping up of sagging dictatorial regimes and the death-for-dollars foreign policy of this country' (Miller, 1991: 26) and the need 'to keep the oil flowing from the Middle East' (Osborne, 1991: 16). These points, Eva Yaa Asantewaa (1991: 18) maintained in the commentary section, constitute 'the matrix of the "new world order," one built on lies, manipulation and bribes.' She continued: 'Imperial President George Bush has ignored the well-being of US citizens while pursuing a foreign policy of intimidation and violence, particularly against old friends who are now seen to be standing in his way and in the way of the financial interests he represents' (ibid.: 19).

The anti-militarism of the AIDS activist movement was echoed in their anti-border politics. The 1987 Pride parade in NYC featured a makeshift concentration camp float, composed of a watchtower, barbed wire, and bars, with Act Up-NY members inside the camp dressed as AIDS

‘prisoners’ and outside dressed as guards in military gear and rubber gloves (Carroll, 2015: 143).<sup>8</sup> Mere weeks prior to the NYC Pride march, the US Congress had passed a travel ban on HIV-positive migrants (Chávez, 2021: 3). This decision was in keeping with the US state’s history of regulating, surveilling, and disciplining migrants in the name of preserving the ‘public health’ of the national population, as well as of medical experimentation on racialized populations such as the forced sterilizations of black, indigenous, and Latina women (ibid.: 19-38). The most popular origin myths of AIDS were racialized from the outset and placed outside of the US, rendering migrants primary targets of blame, stigma, and abuse. One such myth, which held that AIDS arrived in North America from Haiti despite the opposite being true (Farmer, 2006: xii), set the stage for the degrading and violent treatment of the nearly three hundred HIV-positive Haitians who were indefinitely detained at Guantánamo Bay in September 1991. They had fled the country after the military coup that overthrew the democratically elected president Jean-Bertrand Aristide (Chávez, 2021: 142-43). These political refugees were tested for HIV without their consent, deprived of adequate medical care, denied legal recourse, and subjected to deplorable living conditions (ibid.: 64). Karma Chávez (ibid.: 92-95) shows that the detention of Haitian refugees, as well as the travel ban more broadly, was explicitly legitimized on the basis of neoliberal market criteria. HIV-positive migrants were framed as a burden to the US tax-payers. This national common sense, Chávez (ibid.: 96) summarizes, ‘holds no space for Black welfare, only for the exploitation of Black labor.’

AIDS activist groups with connections to the Haitian community, which included Black AIDS Mobilization (BAM!) and Act Up-NY, mobilized in solidarity with the detained Haitians, who had meanwhile begun a hunger strike at Guantánamo Bay (ibid.: 91). On October 30, Act Up organized a protest outside a detention center on Manhattan’s Varick Street, where members carried signs that declared ‘Don’t Jail People for their HIV Status’ and ‘Act Up lucha contra HIV borders,’ chanted ‘2, 4, 6, 8 INS Discriminates’ and ‘Hey hey, ho ho, send Bush to Guantánamo,’ and burned an

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<sup>8</sup> A few years later, Kiyoshi Kuromiya and other Act Up-Philadelphia members would stage a similar performance outside the United States courthouse in downtown Philadelphia using a makeshift quarantine camp in solidarity with incarcerated Haitian refugees at Guantánamo Bay (Gossett, 2014: 37).



effigy of the president (Chávez, 2012: 63). A group of Act Up-NY members helped to organize a two-year long campaign that successfully secured the release and resettlement of over 100 detained Haitians (Schulman, 2021: 432). They even traveled to Guantánamo Bay to meet with the prisoners (ibid.: 438-439). When Housing Works and the Coalition for the Homeless were unable to provide shelter for any more refugees in NYC, Act Up activists lied to the Justice Department that they had spare housing and covered the hotel bills for the additional refugees (ibid.: 441-43).

Protests against the HIV travel and immigration ban extended beyond solidarity with the detained Haitian refugees. Kevin-Niklas Breu (2018: 23) argues that from the point of view of radical queer activists in the Bay Area, ‘by criminalising immigrants and other disenfranchised communities through restrictive AIDS policies, the government of the United States sought to distract US citizens from its financial and organisational shortcomings — as well as from its moral and political obligations — in the political response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic.’ Act Up organized a series of demonstrations against the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) both domestically and internationally in the period between 1987 and 1993. During the week of the Sixth International AIDS Conference in June 1990, AIDS activists organized a series of marches, demonstrations, and workshops, which involved a forum called ‘Speaking Across Borders,’ to protest the exclusion of HIV immigrants and travelers from the conference. Act Up chapters and other AIDS activist groups in Paris, London, Amsterdam, Rio de Janeiro, and Sydney organized solidarity actions (Chavez, 2021: 115-16).<sup>9</sup> In the months prior to the International AIDS Conference, East Coast chapters of Act Up planned demonstrations at the national INS office in Washington, D. C., and Act Up-San Francisco held a rally at their local INS office. Jorge Cortiñas, a Mexican immigrant and speaker at the San Francisco rally, gave a rousing speech that Breu characterizes in the following terms:

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<sup>9</sup> Act Up-Paris in particular has a rich history of anti-border activism — routinely condemning the strengthening of immigration restrictions, establishing a migrants’ rights commission, occupying government offices and lobbying parliament to expand migrants’ access to medical care, and entering into coalitions with various immigrant rights groups (Bosia, 2009: 83-84).

Using a decidedly leftist antiimperialist rhetoric, [Cortiñas] pointed out the inconsistencies of the request for cheap labour on the one hand and the lack of basic civil rights on the other when it came to living conditions for non-US nationals in the United States. As he argued, the working ban on undocumented immigrants, which invited agri-businesses to ‘exploit them under ‘sweatshop’ conditions, resembled the exclusion of people with HIV/AIDS as a similar means of degradation to a ‘second-class citizenship.’ [...] Implicitly drawing on the gay liberationist concept of internal colonialism, he saw the legal entanglement of welfare and security policy as an expression of the US nation state’s covert war against disenfranchised groups.

(Breu, 2018: 32)

In August 1991, the Bush administration stood firm and announced that it would not lift the travel ban. It offered economic reasons for this decision, speciously arguing that lifting the ban would place an undue burden on health care programs (*ibid.*: 37). Immigrant activists effectively exposed the contradictions of the government’s position, as shown in the quote above, by stressing that the US economy relied on the labor of those same undocumented immigrants who they were depriving of health care, denying social benefits, and disciplining with the threat of deportation.

One of the campaigns that supported the release of the Haitian detainees at Guantánamo Bay was the Global AIDS Issues Committee. Act Up co-founder Eric Sawyer (2002) helped to establish the committee, which dealt primarily with treatment access for people living with HIV/AIDS in the global South. He also started the Health Global Access Project (HealthGAP) Coalition with other Act Up-NY members, an organization that was exemplary of the internationalist outlook of the radical strand of the AIDS activist movement. HealthGAP campaigned against the profiteering of multinational pharmaceutical companies and the restriction of affordable treatment to people in the global South. They focused in particular on drug patent protections, which were aggressively enforced under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) of the nineties whilst the United States government not only protected the patent rights of multinational drug companies but ‘used its clout

to stop other countries providing critical drugs to their own citizens by threatening economic sanctions' (ibid.: 94). Bob Kohler (2002: 131) later described the AIDS drugs for Africa campaign as the group that came 'closest to working in the spirit of Gay Liberation Front.' At the Eleventh International AIDS Conference in Vancouver in 1996, Eric Sawyer (2002: 96) held a speech in which he claimed the AIDS crisis had not come to an end 'for the majority of the world's poor, who were continuing to die at genocidal rates.' His speech was followed by an Act Up demonstration. Three years later, Act Up-NY members confronted Al Gore at his presidential campaign launch with signs saying 'Gore's Greed Kills — AIDS Drugs for Africa' due to the Clinton/Gore administration's attempt to prevent the governments of South Africa and Thailand from producing their own generic AIDS medication (ibid.: 98-99). Sawyer (ibid.: 101) insists that activists must 'continue to organize against global financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, which mandate structural adjustment policies that deny countries the right to spend their money on health care and education.'

### Defending queer sexual cultures

Domestically, the AIDS crisis became an alibi for a wide array of neoliberal reforms, from the entrenchment of heteronormative sexual customs to the demolition of queer zones in cities. The man who was made responsible for coordinating Ronald Reagan's AIDS response, Gary Bauer, was a known champion for abstinence, monogamy, and heterosexual marriage. Attempts by Reagan's surgeon general, Dr. C. Everett Koop, to publicly discuss AIDS were thwarted until Reagan's second term, when he came into direct conflict with the administration over his dissemination of AIDS information as part of a federal education strategy (Rimmerman, 2015: 40-42). There was no state funding for any prevention sources that featured explicit same sex material, and government agencies like the CDC warned against the dangers of promiscuity and intravenous drug use, advocating celibacy and abstinence instead (Cooper, 2017: 195). Meanwhile, public health officials shut down commercial sex venues in cities, and popular locations for public sex and cruising became heavily policed. In New York City, this occurred under the pretext of an obsolete state sanitation code (Stein, 2012: 148).

Times Square, which had long been ‘a convergence point for “cultural outsiders,”’ became the epicenter of the sex panic of the eighties and nineties, as its public spaces and adult entertainment establishments were privatized through ‘combinations of globalization, powerful real estate interests, and a conservative regime’ (Shepard, 2002: 203). The thousands of warehouses, lots, and buildings that had been left abandoned across many of New York City’s neighborhoods during the financial crisis of the seventies eventually were auctioned off to luxury housing developers and land speculators (Duncombe, 2002: 222).

These developments were supported by certain members of the AIDS activist movement, who extolled the virtues of privacy, respectability, and domesticity. High-profile AIDS activists who rejected sexual promiscuity included influential writers like Larry Kramer, Randy Shilts, Duncan Osborne, Gabriel Rotello, and Michelangelo Signorile. These Act Up veterans repeated homophobic representations of gay men as vectors for disease, depicted public sex venues as ‘killing fields’ where HIV-positive gay men would deliberately infect careless clientele, and hardened distinctions between respectable, healthy gays and dirty, undesirable communities (Eigo, 2002: 185). Central to these discourses was the notion that ‘the enthroning of sex in gay life in the 1970s had created the conditions for the epidemic’ (Crewe, 2018). The era of sexual liberation was said to have produced reckless, selfish, and antisocial sexual behaviors that accounted for the high rates of infection. More radical members of the AIDS activist movement, however, rejected the alternative between sexual satisfaction and sexual health and argued instead that commercial venues for public sex could in fact serve as educational sites for the practice of safer sex. Forms of physical intimacy, open promiscuity, and erotic pleasure that were not centered around penetration or incorporated the use of condoms were embraced as the most effective way to cultivate safer sexual cultures.

Numerous groups emphasized gay liberation through their actions. Tamar W. Carroll (2015: 18-19) writes of Act Up that the group ‘embraced a “sex-positive” approach, which favored harm-reduction policies such as comprehensive sex education and the provision of condoms and clean needles, while valuing the expression of homosexual and other forms of non-normative sexuality.’ Their promotion of safer sex and self-care practices outside the confines of traditional kinship relations

and national morality antagonized the Catholic Church and the state. One of Act Up's most controversial and impactful protests was the die-in that took place in New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral during a mass in 1989. This Stop the Church demonstration was mainly targeted at the policies espoused by Cardinal John O'Connor, head of the Roman Catholic Church in New York and a member of Ronald Reagan's Presidential Commission on AIDS who had opposed the provision of condoms and clean needles to people living with AIDS (ibid.: 19-20; Cooper, 2017: 198). Indeed, harm reduction was also the guiding principle of Act Up's needle exchange program, the group's longest civil disobedience. Sarah Schulman (2021: 281) has argued that the Needle Exchange Committee countered the pathologization and criminalization of drug users and 'a deeply punitive and puritanical culture of response' to addiction.

A celebration of sexual expression and eroticism was infused into the activism of Act Up. Many members recall that romantic relationships, love affairs, flirtations, and casual sex were all common within the group and lent the activism its vitality and dynamism (Carroll, 2015: 173-74). Act Up blurred the lines between personal, professional, and political life. Jim Eigo (2002: 184), for instance, maintains that the weekly Act Up meetings were 'the sexiest space in the city for a gay guy to be on a Monday night' and remembers Act Up as the first group to reclaim the eroding urban sex spaces of the AIDS crisis. In *Let the Record Show*, Sarah Schulman (2021) speaks to numerous AIDS veterans about their social life in Act Up, including Dudley Saunders, who reminisces:

At that time, safe sex was the easiest thing in the world — it was just what you did. We were all in this together. I never had to think about it. It was so simple. In fact, safe sex was a problem before I got into ACT UP, which we've now seen in studies, the more disconnected you are from the gay community, the more likely you are, you know, to have unsafe sex.

(Schulman, 2021: 602)

In 1995, core members of Act Up founded the AIDS Prevention Action League (APAL), which campaigned against New York City's enforcement of sex venue closures. Jim Eigo (2002: 188),

one of the co-founders, writes that the most compelling arguments that APAL presented at public hearings against the city's rezoning were stories about members' personal experiences in the safer sex cultures that were cultivated by commercial sex venues like porn theaters and bathhouses. Eigo (*ibid.*: 189) recalls APAL's wide range of AIDS prevention work, which went beyond their advocacy within commission chambers to include initiatives like Pride floats that 'burlesqued sex acts on a bed and in a booth,' postcard projects that disseminated 'short, complex sex stories drawn from the lives of APAL members,' and educational sex parties that brought together '450 men of different races, shapes, ages, and classes coming together in a model of supportive, safer public sex in the face of city harassment.' The group also launched the Sexclub Project, which circulated information among customers of various sex venues and sought to transform such spaces into supportive, safer sexual communities (*ibid.*: 189). APAL regarded the communal fabric of gay life in New York City as the most effective means to establish new sexual norms and practices. Their promotion of safer promiscuity and pleasure, expressed through lurid prevention slogans like 'Come on me not in me,' had an avowedly utopian political dimension. Eigo (*ibid.*: 195) expressed their mission thus: 'We try to keep alive an idea of a utopia, which in these dark times for freedoms, (homo)sexual and other, exists more and more as (im)pure idea. Besides, I want to bring you and your buddies more and better orgasms.' SexPanic!, founded in 1997, was a related group that counteracted the sex panic of the nineties that was accelerating the citywide crackdown on cruising grounds, gay clubs and bars, and sex venues. According to Shepard (2002: 205), 'SexPanic!'s goal was to challenge the steamroller of big real estate and corporate interest homogenizing the cultural landscape.' The group sought to preserve public space, and more specifically to defend the city's public sexual culture that was under assault from closures, police raids, and privatizations, as well as the attendant norms of white, bourgeois domesticity, sexual shame, and procreative heterosexuality (*ibid.*).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> These challenges to the privatization of sexuality were not unique to the actions of New York-based activist groups. Act Up-Paris operated in the face of the dominant tradition of French republican universalism, which relegated all sexual activities to the private sphere. Many have noted that this context created difficulties for the politicization of sexual identity and culture, and of AIDS, in France. Indeed, Act Up-Paris's participation in Pride events was the subject of controversy, since many in

In a 1990 article from the radical San Francisco-based periodical *Out/Look*, Eric Rofes (1990) offers a retrospective on the relationship between AIDS activism and the gay liberation movement. Rofes (ibid.: 657) faults certain gay and lesbian activists for adopting ‘a revisionist history of gay male sex culture of the 1970s’ that characterizes gay liberationism as a period of ‘mindless, drug-induced, compulsive promiscuity’ rather than a political movement ‘that resisted the oppression of the nuclear family, strove to free men and women from constrictive gender roles, and developed bonding between adults based on playfulness, passion, and erotic exploration, rather than ownership.’ In the article, he highlights the continuities between the gay liberationist movement and contemporaneous strands of radical HIV activism. The eroticization of safer sex, the destigmatization of sexual practices like S/M and fisting, and the celebration of lesbian sexuality, as well as the protection of communal sexual spaces, are listed as integral components of the pre-AIDS gay liberationist agenda (ibid.: 658). Rofes (ibid.: 659) concludes: ‘We can do more than care for the dying and fight for the living — we can ensure that the community most impacted by HIV makes full and creative use of the opportunities the epidemic presents for advancing a gay and lesbian liberation agenda.’ As Rofes’s article emphasizes, the actions of radical AIDS activists were aligned with the politics of gay liberationism. Groups formed to struggle against a sexual regime defined by heteronormative social conventions like marriage and monogamy and the separation of sexuality from wider social systems. They engaged instead in a confrontational quest to eroticize everyday life, liberate human pleasures and desires, and erode the boundaries between the public and the private. Their political practices were creative, militant, and collective.

Numerous political and personal writings from the period reflect on this approach to sexuality. Douglas Crimp’s important essay ‘How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic’ expresses how AIDS activists were able to effectively invert the neoconservative discourses of the eighties and nineties. In the essay, Crimp, an artist historian who consciously incorporated activism into his pedagogy (Schulman, 2021: 289), exposes the insidious nature of conventional moral myths that posited monogamy as a solution to the epidemic. First, he wrote, monogamy does not guarantee protection against HIV. Gay

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France were reluctant to acknowledge the links between AIDS and homosexuality (Ernst, 1997; Nakayama, 2012).

men were not being told to practice safer sex, but rather to choose one safe sexual partner (Crimp, 1987: 254). Monogamy therefore functioned not to promote safer sex, but rather to erect and enforce distinctions between ‘responsible’ citizens and those groups who were figured as a threat to the health of the body politic. Second, these prevailing discourses about monogamy and sexual respectability erase the devastating effects of HIV/AIDS on groups other than non-monogamous gay men — from intravenous drug users to populations in Central Africa, ‘where the syndrome is a problem of apocalyptic dimensions, but to this day receives almost no attention in the US’ (ibid.: 250). He then cites Cindy Patton’s groundbreaking work on HIV to argue that the strategies of sexual liberation were the precondition for the invention of safer sex:

We were able to invent safe sex because we have always known that sex is not, in an epidemic or not, limited to penetrative sex. Our promiscuity taught us many things, not only about the pleasures of sex, but about the great multiplicity of those pleasures. It is that psychic penetration, that experimentation, that conscious work on our own sexualities that has allowed many of us to change our sexual behaviors — something that brutal ‘behavioral therapies’ tried unsuccessfully for over a century to force us to do — very quickly and very dramatically.

(Crimp, 1987: 252)

Crimp’s analysis links the pursuit of sexual pleasure to the queer political struggles of the gay liberationists and AIDS activists alike. Through collective mourning of friends and lovers, and through collective fighting against state repression and inaction, Crimp (ibid.: 270) writes, ‘we are now reclaiming our subjectivities, our communities, our culture... and our promiscuous love of sex.’ This account of the life-sustaining practices collectively cultivated in the bathhouses of the eighties reflects Foucault’s writings on sexuality from the preceding decade, which, according to David Halperin (1995: 15), represented ‘the single most important intellectual source of political inspiration’ for the political struggle against HIV/AIDS. Halperin (ibid.: 72-73) explains that, for Foucault, gay and lesbian social formations presented unique opportunities for the invention, cultivation, and multiplication of new desires, relationships, forms of love, and sexual acts. Foucault’s views on S/M illustrated how



queer social and sexual worlds constituted sites for a creative and positive construction of new pleasures. Foucault recognized S/M as an inventive strategy, Halperin (*ibid.*: 86-88) notes, that consisted in the demonopolization of the genitals through a creative redistribution of bodily pleasures, an eroticization of non-genital sites of the body, and the substitution of orgasm with intensity and duration of pleasure as the ultimate goal of sex.

AIDS activists understood such opportunities for the radical redefinition of sex and the elaboration of safe promiscuity to be under direct threat from the normalizing privatization of sexuality. In the words of Floyd (2009: 198), because queer activists sustained social worlds in the face of ‘a broader neoliberal assault on social collectivity as such,’ they were able to generate practical knowledges of promiscuity and sexual intimacy that protected individuals from contracting HIV *and* negated neoliberalism’s separation of the sexual and the social (even as they were constrained by that very separation). In this way queer negotiations of the public, rooted in the gay liberation movement’s rejection of closeted isolation and construction of queer socialities, stood diametrically opposed to the neoliberal logics of privacy and property (*ibid.*: 204). Crucially, these neoliberal logics were articulated alongside notions of nationhood and citizenship. National belonging was secured and reproduced through the sanitized institutions of heterosexual marriage, private sex and monogamy, and legitimate procreation — dismantling the proletarian (often racialized) queer formations that threaten these privileged institutions of social reproduction and disavowing the exploitative relations and class differences within heterosexual society itself. The neoliberal project therefore inscribes privatized sexuality as a central index of citizenship, stipulating all forms of life that bear no relation to the bourgeois private sphere as subversive of the nation as such (Berlant and Warner, 1998: 553-55). When Douglas Crimp, as cited above, writes that discourses about monogamy and private sex obscure the disastrous effects of AIDS on populations in Central Africa through their exclusive focus on non-monogamous gay male lifestyles, he is identifying how dominant moral narratives about AIDS were instrumental to furthering the project of what Lauren Berlant and Michael Walker (*ibid.*: 553) refer to as ‘national-capitalist privatization,’ rather than protecting people living with HIV/AIDS.

Perhaps no text better captures the disastrous effects of neoliberalism's enforcement of privatized sexuality and citizenship than Samuel Delany's 1999 book *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*. It offers an account of the inter-class, inter-racial encounters that New York City's heterogeneous public sex spaces facilitated prior to the development projects that demolished their infrastructures. The rich autobiographical stories dispersed throughout the book depict the sexual as inextricable from the social in these spaces, drawing a stark contrast to the separation of the sexual and the social that new urban policies and forms of policing enforced in the following decades. These spaces, Delany (1999: 127) writes, 'menace the distinction between private and public' as they promote unscripted encounters between people of different races, classes, nationalities, genders, and sexual orientations that are not mediated or sanctioned by professional motives, requisite social etiquette, or property ownership. He articulates these complex social (and sexual) relationships as integral to life in a democratic city. The question that preoccupies Delany is, in the words of Robert Reid-Pharr (2019: xi), how 'we might come to recognize our neighbors, both near and far, as neither competitors nor impediments to our efforts of survival, but instead as companions, lovers, and kin whose success and pleasure redound upon us.' Delany (1999: 111) alerts the reader to the manifold ways in which the neoliberal 'class war' erodes the social interactions, including safer sex practices, and the social institutions that sustain communities on the margins. In his analysis, AIDS appears as an instrument that accelerates the destruction of social spaces and forcibly displaces 'undesirable' communities. Delany (ibid.: 157): 'AIDS functions, on an international level, as a discursive tool to keep visitors to the city away from all public facilities and places where, yes, one might, if so inclined, engage in or be subject to any sort of interclass contact.'

The writings of Douglas Crimp, Eric Rofes, Samuel Delany, and others considered above were published around the same time that the discipline of queer theory was established. Although these influential texts were widely read and frequently cited within academic queer scholarship, they are not generally considered representative of nineties academic queer scholarship as such. Why this is the case, what wider social relations it reflects, and how it has affected the production of critical queer knowledges, is the subject of the final sections.

## Historicizing queer theory

Queer theory<sup>11</sup> emerged in the early nineties in the United States, at the height of the AIDS crisis in the United States. Hundreds of thousands had already died and hundreds of thousands more were suffering from AIDS-related illness. The confrontational, direct-action tactics of queer activists from campaigns like Act Up functioned as an inspiration and stimulus for queer scholarship. Queer theory is frequently represented as an ‘academic arm of activism,’ as enabled by certain kinds of queer activism that emerged in the US during the AIDS epidemic (Duggan, 1994: 190). Act Up and Queer Nation in particular are cited as vital inspirations and provocations that propelled queer theory (see Berlant et al., 2022). Michael Warner (2012) sees Act Up’s battle against shame and normalization as laying the groundwork for much of queer theoretical production; Annamaria Jagose (1996: 95) explores the development of queer theory in relation to numerous political movements, including the lesbian feminism and the homophile movement, and states that the AIDS epidemic ‘reinforced a radical revision of contemporary lesbian and gay politics’ that marked advancements within the academy; and Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1995: 344) describe queer theorists not only as prompted by the AIDS activism ‘to see themselves as bringing a queerer world into being,’ but also as actively positioning their knowledge production in relation to those activist practices.

At the same time, recognition was being extended to some middle-class lesbian and gay scholars, enabling the institutionalization of queer theory within the academy. Definitions of queer theory often characterize the field through its stance of opposition to what Lisa Duggan (1992: 23) terms ‘hegemonic, structured relations and meanings of sexuality and gender,’ instead emphasizing

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<sup>11</sup> The term ‘queer theory’ names a broad, diverse, and heterogeneous ensemble of emergent and conflicting knowledges. References to ‘a’ queer theory therefore necessarily suppress the field’s multiplicity and invite a series of qualifications. Whilst aiming to foreground the field’s internal debates and differences, when speaking of ‘queer theory’ I have in mind the canonized body of work produced by those scholars who are widely credited with having inaugurated the field, including Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Leo Bersani, Michael Warner, Lauren Berlant, Lee Edelman, José Esteban Muñoz, and Jack Halberstam.

their contextual and performative nature. These definitions, as is shown below, tend to cite as founding texts Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (first published in French in 1976), Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*. The latter two were both originally published in 1990.<sup>12</sup> Queer theorists actively embraced the category *queer*, a term used to shame 'deviant' or 'perverse' sexual experiences and identities that were unintelligible within the confines of the arbitrary homo-heterosexual or male-female binary. They therefore sought to denaturalize neat, conventional delineations of normative gender or sexual practices. Queer theory's denaturalizing moves relied heavily upon currents within poststructuralist and psychoanalytic thought.

This section explores and historicizes the accounts given of queer theory within some of its most widely-cited texts. Queer theorists are often quick to declare that the field's potential and power lies in the constitutive impossibility of settling on a final definition of queer theory. They remind us that what is transgressive about queer theory is precisely its ephemerality, fluidity, and multiplicity. As Alan McKee (1999: 237) notes, 'the resistance to definition stands as a metonym for a defining feature of much writing which claims the status of Queer Theory.' This section argues that these accounts mystify the historical and social conditions of queer theory's emergence, embedding an ahistoricism within the academic writings of the nineties and beyond. The institutionalization of queer theory as an academic discipline, I argue, produced new instantiations of queer knowledges that were increasingly uncoupled from the collective theoretical articulations that arose from within the radical queer movements of the eighties and nineties. As shown above, the AIDS activist movement was also an *intellectual* movement that produced rich and inventive theorizations about social reality under the neoliberal reorganization of the social order. Queer theory is at its most instructive and radical when its

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<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that none of these texts deploy the term *queer*. Butler (1990: vii) has even expressed their original intention to situate the text within feminism and their subsequent surprise that it would 'be cited as one of the founding texts of queer theory'. Academic theory began to invoke the signifier in the early nineties, at the same time that political activist groups, most notably Queer Nation, were resignifying the term. Michael Warner (2012) has recalled the 'high-voltage charge of insult and stigma' that the term *queer* carried with it at the time.

insights are brought to bear on the social transformations and queer political struggles of its time, yet this can only be achieved through a thorough historicization of the field.

### *The mystification of queer theory's moorings*

Mobility is the political desire that appears to animate queer theory as an academic discipline. Robyn Wiegman (2012: 113) ascribes the allure and seduction of queer theory to its mobility, explaining that it allows the field 'to occupy differing and nonsyncretic times; roam across various epistemic, affective, and theoretical domains without ever being reduced to any single one of them; and remain in awe of (but unintimidated by) what it doesn't know.' Queer theorists are not unnerved by this openness or anti-disciplinarity, but rather embrace it as one of the field's constitutive features. In his agenda-setting introduction to the anthology *Fear of a Queer Planet*, Michael Warner (1993) characterizes the term *queer* as drawing its critical force from its mobility. As a critique of representational politics and its incessant search for authenticity and reliance upon reifications of identity, *queer* signifies for Warner (ibid.: xxvi) 'an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration of simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal.' *Queer* does not name a constituency whose interests it can claim to represent, nor is it an ontological condition. It acquires its mobility by positioning itself *against* any such attempt at fixity or closure.

For queer theory, mobility therefore functions as a disciplinary practice. Imbued with optimism and political value, mobility structures queer theory's imaginary by granting legibility and giving shape to the field. This commitment to mobility is articulated in range of queer theoretical texts. In a piece entitled 'What Does Queer Theory Teach Us About X?,' Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1995: 343) object to people's persistent 'need to introduce, anatomize, and theorize' the term. They insist that 'part of the point of using the word queer in the first place was the wrenching sense of recontextualization it gave, and queer commentary has tried hard to sustain awareness of diverse context boundaries' (ibid.: 345). They therefore refuse to consider queer theory 'a thing' that could

teach us about something in particular or that could produce a concrete political program. Queer theory's attachment to mobility is, for Warner and Berlant, a source of immense hope for the burgeoning field. They write: 'This failure to systematize the world in queer theory does not mean a commitment to irrelevance; it means resistance to being an apparatus for falsely translating systematic and random violences into normal states, administrative problems, or minor constituencies' (ibid.: 348).

In their essay 'Critically Queer', Judith Butler (1993: 19) makes a related point, positing *queer* as 'a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings' which is 'never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes.' Butler (ibid.: 21) is arguing, firstly, that the contours that shape the meaning and usage of the term *queer* can never be decided in advance and, secondly, that the democratization of the term depends on the continuous effort to 'affirm the contingency of the term,' that is, to contest the exclusions it effects and renew the political goals it invests in. In a special issue of *Social Text*, David Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Muñoz (2005: 3) describe queerness's openness to the ongoing critique of its established parameters as 'one of the field's key theoretical and political promises' and go on to suggest a number of ways in which queerness should be renewed in order to maintain its critical force in the contemporary context. In their view, the mobility of the term *queer* allows it to be perennially reworked to effectively address the pressing global concerns of the present and guarantees its continued political salience.

A number of queer scholars have attended to the tensions, contradictions, and limitations of the field's commitment to anti-disciplinarity and mobility. Against the claim that to speak of 'a' queer theory would be to attempt a form of closure that is at odds with the anti-identitarian ethos of queer theory, Alan McKee (1999) has argued that this characterization of the field is belied by the fact that queer theory *is* made to signify. Judgments about what queer theory is are constantly being made by journals, university courses, reading lists, search engine algorithms, and so on. To maintain that queer theory is radically unknowable and unfixed, he argues, is to fail to account for the way it functions in these institutional settings. In McKee's (ibid.: 237) own words: "Queer" is not an entirely empty

signifier. It has historically been inscribed in a number – but a finite number – of ways.’ Nikki Sullivan (2003) extends the concerns voiced by McKee in her *Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, arguing that a reluctance to define queer theory is problematic not only because it occludes the relations of power that are already at work in the constitution of the field, but because its enigmatic calls for unknowability and indefinability can promote a dangerously misleading sense of inclusivity. She sums up as follows: ‘Queer Theory will be no less problematic than the humanist system that it claims to be attempting to work against’ (ibid.: 47).

Kadji Amin (2016: 175) identifies mobility as queer theory’s political promise when he writes that the field ‘has long celebrated *queer* as an almost infinitely mobile and mutable theoretical term that, unlike *gay* and *lesbian* or *feminist*, need not remain bound to any particular identity, historical context, politics, or object of study and, for that very reason, promises a cutting-edge political intervention.’ However, Amin (ibid.: 173) is also attuned to the unrealizability of that promise: even if *queer* is construed as mobile and mutable, ‘it is, nevertheless, not equally capable of being applied to *anything* nonnormative and boundary crossing.’ Queer theory is a field, Amin (ibid.: 179) writes, ‘paradoxically defined by its lack of a defined object of study.’ For McKee (1999: 236), this paradox functions as a form of mystification, as a ‘defensive strategy’ that can shield the field from historicization or critique by making it ‘impossible to begin to write histories of Queer, of accounts of the term’s usefulness, because any such project would be — inherently and inescapably — un-Queer.’

Some scholars have suggested that queer theory’s founding promise of mobility, fluidity, and disruption is itself reflective of the dominant neoliberal logics and restructurings of the eighties and nineties. Divisions of labor were becoming more decentered; production was coming to rely on an increasingly mobile and flexible labor force; and subjectivities were being constructed in terms of lifestyle and cultural dispositions, displacing categories of social class. There is a troubling harmony between these developments and the subversive orchestration of fluid, flexible, and playful gender identities. Rosemary Hennessy (2018: 68) has pointed to an ‘ideological affiliation’ between the theoretical dispositions of nineties queer theory and neoliberal forms of consciousness, as the subversive play with governing norms and cultural codes increasingly becomes an imperative within

queer social movements, celebrity culture, and corporate boardrooms alike. The porous and resignifiable nature of identity is not only an increasingly accepted idea, she suggests, but also a profitable one. A related argument is pursued by Christopher Chitty. Rather than regarding the collapse of ‘the normal’ or ‘the normative’ as ushering in a utopian state of sexual freedom and possibility, Chitty (2020: 176) has attended to the ways that ‘gender and sexual flexibility have also been forced upon subjects as a consequence of precarity.’ This crisis of ‘the normal,’ through its weakening of the rigid sexual and gender binaries against which ‘queerness’ positions itself, might also explain the growing nebulousness of the term ‘queer’ and the routine quarrels about who may claim the label. Might it be less curious that queer theory was institutionalized and gained ascendancy in the university at the same time that humanities and social sciences were in widespread decline if we acknowledge that the queer theory’s theoretical and political orientations coincided with the demands of capital under neoliberalism (Penney, 2014: 70-71)?

As early as the nineties, a new stereotypical image of a high-earning, propertied white gay consumer demographic with disposable income and no children began to circulate. A quest amongst ad agencies, consumer credit lenders, stockbrokers, and legal advisors ensued to capture this niche consumer market. Reflecting on this induction of a newly legitimate gay male demographic into the world of consumer credit, Melinda Cooper (2017: 160) writes that ‘1990s queer theory itself appears in retrospect to be suffused with the spirit of securitized credit markets.’ The anti-normative, radical democratic spirit of queer theory, she argues, was far from incongruous with the unprecedented extension of credit opportunities to borrowers that, just a few years ago, would have been considered uninsurable or ‘non-normalizable.’ To note such convergences, however, should not be a pretext to displace or dismiss this scholarship. On the contrary, as the final section shows, it is through the avowal of queer theory’s historical moorings and conditions of production that it becomes possible to excavate its most persuasive and radical lessons.

In short, queer theory *is* marked by a specific history, geopolitical location, and institutional context. To historicize the emergence and development of queer theory, to consider the social relations that the field reflected and was inflected by, requires a demystification of the narrative that *queer* is an



almost infinitely renewable critical force. Kadji Amin (2016: 180) has proposed that ‘rather than continuing to celebrate queer mobility and lack of definition, we ground *queer* in its various contexts, histories, genealogies, and inheritances.’ What he is arguing for is a contextualization of queer theory through an elucidation of ‘the historical and social conditions that shape what is possible, imaginable, and sensible under the sign of *queer*’ (ibid.: 185). Following Amin, this section looks beyond queer theory’s enthrallment to fluidity and spontaneity and instead asks: What are the historical conditions that gave rise to queer theory as a form of critical knowledge production? What discursive underpinnings belie queer theory’s limitless mobility? What histories, debates, and social movements central to queer theory’s formation are occluded if we fail to admit that ‘*queer* is not endlessly open-ended, polyvalent, and reattachable’ (ibid.: 181)?

Scholars have already extensively charted the disavowals and exclusions that are constitutive and generative of queer theory as a field yet have been concealed through its stated aim to mobility. They have exposed queer theory’s epistemological and methodological whiteness (see Cohen, 1997; Barnard, 1999; Muñoz, 1999; Ferguson, 2004), its neglect of the lives and experiences of transgendered people (see Namaste, 2000; Stryker and Whittle, 2006; Heaney, 2017; Chu and Drager, 2019), and its occlusion of other critical archives (see Chitty (2020) on queer scholarship’s reliance upon a bourgeois literary archive that overrepresents the experience of a privileged class of homosexuals). In what follows, I home in on one pertinent disavowal in particular: of the field’s own institutionalization.

### ***Queer theory’s institutionalization***

Queer theory comes into legibility through a disavowal of its own institutionalization. Erin J. Rand (2014: 31) highlights this tension by stating that queer scholars’ agency ‘arises precisely from their ability to utilize the conventional form of academic writing and to negotiate the expectations of their academic institutions.’ Even as it purports to be anti-disciplinary, queer theory can only be said to cohere to the extent that it can claim particular analytics, modes of inquiry, rationalities, and affective terrains as its own — that is, to the extent that it is institutionalized. In other words, the institutional

emergence of queer theory shows that anti-disciplinarity is a central disciplinary measure of queer theory's own 'queerness.' Queer scholars who have engaged with this conundrum presented by the field's institutionalization have too often been sidelined and dismissed. Jeffrey Escoffier (1998), for example, has argued that the institutionalization of queer theory has severed the structural ties of scholars to gay and lesbian communities. He attributes this widening gap to the desire for academic respectability that goes hand in hand with the abdication of community responsibility. Escoffier (1998: 105) juxtaposes a Stonewall generation of lesbian and gay scholars who had direct experience of the political battles of the early 1970s (employed either precariously by less prestigious institutions or unaffiliated with any academic institution) with a post-Stonewall generation of scholars who 'trained at elite universities,' 'occupy jobs at more prestigious institutions,' and 'emphasize sophisticated interpretations of texts rather than the social history or sociology of gay life.' The post-Stonewall generation is represented by queer scholars like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lee Edelman, and David Halperin. Escoffier makes three main claims. First, these queer scholars no longer address the questions that preoccupy the community. Second, queer scholars have built on the body of research produced by a younger generation of scholars who did not enjoy the same forms of institutional support, yet their contributions are often obscured because they were cultivated outside the academy. Finally, and perhaps most provocatively, the institutional changes required to establish queer theory as an academic discipline, including steps taken to establish academic legitimacy and secure support from the wider academic community, require that scholars 'respond more to academic and disciplinary standards than to the political and cultural concerns of the lesbian and gay communities outside the university' (ibid.: 115). Institutionalization, in Escoffier's view, is therefore predicated on the isolation of queer scholars from the communities to which they are responsible.

Many queer scholars have repudiated the characterization of queer theory as an academic discipline that has lost touch with the broad-based political concerns of the lesbian and gay community. Erin Rand (2014: 42) questions the assumption that such a 'community' can be said to exist in the first place, as well as the suggestion that 'the primary criterion for judging the political agency of academic work is its effects at the level of the social.' She points out that for queer scholars

like Teresa de Lauretis, political agency is understood as enacted through critical knowledge production itself (ibid.: 48). Lisa Duggan (1994: 190) argues that the stark opposition that Escoffier sets up between generations of queer scholars erases the work that does not fall neatly into either generation and understates the internal debates within each group. More generally, queer theorists dispute suggestions that their writing has been domesticated and disciplined by the academy, or that conformity to the conventional norms of the university has blunted the edges of their political critiques.

There is no doubt that the queer activism of the eighties and nineties anticipated many of the academic field's subsequent developments, and that queer theoretical counter-discourses were employed by queer activists. Queer scholarly and activist practices are deeply interwoven. My aim is not to suggest that the institutionalization of queer theory necessarily entails its depoliticization, to romanticize activism as an *a priori* more authentic and radical form of social practice, to establish one side of the theory/practice divide as primary, or to understate the structural pressures that installed the university as the principal site of knowledge cultivation and validation in the post-war decades. However, to the extent that the (both enabling and constraining) dimensions of queer theory's institutionalization are generative of the discipline itself — shaping its readership, its theoretical concerns and modes of inquiry, its vocabularies — it is important that queer scholars attend to its development and effects. Lisa Duggan therefore rightfully points out that, although there are legitimate concerns about Escoffier's argument, the unhesitating dismissal of the tensions and hierarchies his article highlighted was regrettable. Duggan (1994: 190): '[Escoffier] performed the invaluable service of articulating a grievance, and offering a history and defense for a decade's worth of pioneering scholarship, much of it eked out in the margins of daily lives consumed with wage labor, and stigmatized outside of the ghettoized communities in which it was forged.'

An engagement with queer theory's history of institutionalization generates insights about the conditions of the field's emergence and about the ways that particular queer political movements are documented and remembered. The texts that are credited with having paved the way for queer theory (such as *The History of Sexuality*, *Epistemology of the Closet*, and *Gender Trouble*) as well as later texts

that are now considered canonical (such as Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* or Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*) do not mention queer activism at all. Attending to the effects of queer theory's institutionalization within a bourgeois, primarily Anglo-American academic milieu of both scholarly and activist practices must be immanent to its critical project. The urgency of this reflexive practice becomes especially clear in *The Gentrification of the Mind*, Sarah Schulman's personal recollection of the disappearance of New York City's rebellious queer culture and political movement during the AIDS years. For Schulman (2012: 113-14), the imagination of an entire generation was gentrified through the unexplored trauma of the AIDS epidemic, which she situates within the wider context of 'the narrowing of discourse, the homogenization of our cities, the restriction on public conversation, the stupidity of American entertainment, and the gathering of power into fewer and fewer hands.' Although her analysis often problematically implies the existence of an authentic, free, and rebellious queer mind that has been corrupted and rendered banal through gentrification, it is nevertheless a robust and insightful account of the professionalization and privatization of queer cultural and intellectual production as it was displaced from collective, community-based artistic and activist spaces to prestigious university settings or elite art institutions under neoliberalism. Steven Seidman (1995) echoes similar concerns, but places the gentrifying process Schulman describes within a broader history. Seidman finds the beginnings of a 'lesbian and gay national cultural apparatus' in as early as the seventies, when liberationists in the US were producing 'short essays, poems, pamphlets, manifestos, memoirs, short stories, and autobiographical statements rather than analytical or theoretically oriented books' (ibid.: 120). As became clear in the preceding chapters, they were committed to their communities' movements, and their audience was a wider public readership. Various newsletters, newspapers, periodicals, magazines, and literary associations continued to be created throughout the eighties as part of a broad community-building effort. Many of the contributors were affiliated with universities, yet their roles as academics and public intellectuals were rarely distinct. The institutionalization of queer theory marks a break with this period. Despite acknowledging queer theory's indebtedness to the politics of queer activist groups of the late eighties and nineties, Seidman (ibid.: 122) argues that the ever-growing divide

between the academic and non-academic sector means that ‘there is a distinct possibility that gay theory and politics will have only a feeble connection.’ Seidman’s account of institutionalization illustrates that, whilst queer theory undoubtedly incorporated the spirit of AIDS activism into its work, there was nonetheless a notable shift in the mode of knowledge production.

There is an irony that a field so deeply committed to anti-assimilationism would become so rapidly ‘embraced by, canonized by, and absorbed into our (largely heterosexual) institutions of knowledge’ (Halperin, 2003: 341). It is incumbent upon queer theorists to engage with these intriguing developments. The institutionalization of intellectual discourse — along with the abstraction from realities outside of the academy that it often entails — does not necessarily depoliticize it or undermine its significance. In fact, this divergence might carry with it unanticipated forms of political agency. Nor does the appearance of queer theory within the university in a moment of neoliberal globalization mean that it is simply a symptom or reflection of a particular set of capitalist social relations. However, the way that the theory/practice divide materializes within any given historical context has profound effects on the capacities and directionalities of each side of the divide. The institutionalization of queer theory must therefore be acknowledged and engaged with more substantially.

One such engagement is found in Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed’s *If Memory Serves: Gay Men, AIDS and the Promise of the Queer Past*. The authors provide an incisive commentary about various forms of forgetting and unremembering that characterized gay culture of the nineties. Castiglia and Reed (2012: 3) argue that the AIDS epidemic ‘became an occasion for a powerful concentration of cultural forces that made (and continue to make) the syndrome an agent of amnesia.’ Significantly, they show that it was not only the gay neoconservatives of the 1990s that framed the onset of AIDS as the natural outcome of a reckless, pathological, hedonistic, and narcissistic gay sexual culture. According to the authors, the queer theorists of the nineties, whilst challenging widespread depictions of their sexual past, also unwittingly participated in the systematic cultural unremembering of the sixties and seventies. In particular, they find the anti-social turn in queer theory to be complicit in this discursive operation: ‘Queer theorists turned the depression and anxiety generated by AIDS and

neoconservatism into de-historicized forces of shame and other death-driven affects, positing these as the affective norm of queer life' (ibid.: 8). Tim Dean (2006: 826) has similarly noted that the anti-social thesis originates 'in right-wing fantasies about how "the homosexual agenda" undermines the social fabric.' Leo Bersani's essay *Is the Rectum a Grave?* is perhaps the most famous example of a queer text that attempts to expediently embrace neoconservative fantasies. Indeed, Bersani (1987: 209, 219) explicitly states that his intention is 'to accept the pain of embracing, at least provisionally, a homophobic representation of homosexuality' and to dismiss 'the rhetoric of sexual liberation in the '60s and '70s.'<sup>13</sup> Castiglia and Reed (2012: 155) argue that this work dehistoricizes affects of shame, pessimism, and humiliation and naturalizes them as timeless, essential truths of the queer psyche: 'The social losses associated throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s with "sex" were translated into rhetorical shattering, death drives, and melancholic absences detached from their historical ties and reattached to universalized psychological or ontological inevitabilities.' In other words, Castiglia and Reed are interested in demonstrating how queer theory's translation of social losses into death-driven affects perpetuates forms of forgetting and unremembering. They therefore provide useful insights into the reasons for the remarkable overlap between the history of AIDS and the history of queer theory and point us toward the wider social determinants that impacted the ascendancy of queer theory. Their analysis also shows that this division between the past and the present coincided with the academic institutionalization of minority sexual cultures and knowledges. As Castiglia and Reed (ibid.: 145) note, it was just as 'queer theory came to seem conceptually discontinuous with critical work inspired by the gay liberation movement' that the academic purchase of queer theory began to grow significantly.

More so than in the previous two chapters, which showed how deeply entangled the practice of the gay liberationists and the black feminists was with their intellectual writings, this chapter's discussion of the AIDS movement appears relatively separate from its discussion of queer theory. This

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<sup>13</sup> Leo Bersani has since distanced himself from some of the strong claims advanced in this essay. In 'Sociality and Sexuality' he reflects: 'Much of this now seems to me a rather facile, even irresponsible celebration of "self-defeat". Masochism is not a viable alternative to mastery, either practically or theoretically. The defeat of the self belongs to the same relational system, the same relational imagination, as the self's exercise of power' (Bersani, 2000: 648).

disjointed structure, I am suggesting, is itself a product of the institutionalization of queer theory and the mystification of its moorings. Similarly, the role of the transnational has receded from view in the above discussion of queer theory's emergence. Indeed, nineties queer theory appears to reiterate a geopolitical provincialism that was foreign to the consciousness of the radical members of the AIDS movement. Proclamations about limitless adaptability and mobility in effect produce the opposite: a striking provincialism. Therefore, despite protestations to the contrary, queer theory remains uniquely preoccupied with the Western homosexual subject. This provincialism has disabled a thorough engagement with the ways that neoliberal globalization, (im)migration, geopolitics, and other transnational circuits affect our understandings and experiences of sexuality (see Povinelli and Chauncey, 1999; Altman, 2001; Grewal and Kaplan, 2001; Hemmings, 2007) and has elided histories of colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism in the construction of 'Western' sexualities (see Stoler, 1989; Hoad, 2000; Alexander, 2005). The following and final section seeks to bridge the gap between nineties queer theory and practice by situating the former more firmly within the context of the latter.

### Counterreadings of queer theory

This chapter has argued that AIDS activism represented a form of transnational political struggle that opposed the vicissitudes of the neoliberal globalization. It was also the source of much critical knowledge production during this period. The institutionalization of queer theory during the nineties, however, has tended to demystify its own origins in the radical queer movement of the time. The theoretical and political force of queer theory was attenuated as the field increasingly abstracted itself from its own conditions of possibility. This section offers an interpretation of two key queer theoretical works — Lee Edelman's *No Future* and Judith Butler's writing on precarious life — to

illustrate how queer theory might be read in a new light when it is situated within its specific history.<sup>14</sup> It argues that a key impulse within queer theory is the rejection of the privatizing logics of neoliberalism, and an insistence on the possibility of achieving sexual liberation through an embrace of eroticism, promiscuity, and vulnerability (rather than individualism, private property, and bourgeois sexual morality).

Lee Edelman's polemic *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* opens with a political controversy surrounding President Bill Clinton's decision to actively present himself in public service announcements as the defender of American family values, and of children more specifically. The broader socio-historical context of this moral legitimation strategy is not disclosed, but is fundamental to an understanding of Edelman's main postulations in the remainder of the text. Bill Clinton's presidency was an inflection point for bourgeois gay men under neoliberal capitalism. The acute period of the AIDS epidemic had come to an end, and gay men were being depicted as a new demographic of ideal consumers. As members of the gay and lesbian community were granted access to consumer credit, they became concerned with obtaining methods to secure their accumulated wealth. Cooper (2017: 163): '[Gay men] were now loudly demanding the recognition of their relationships as legitimate units of reproduction and inheritance. The question of legitimate reproduction — and inheritance more generally — has been central to campaigns in favor of same-sex marriage.' In this pursuit to secure legal avenues for the transmission of their private property, a growing gay and lesbian constituency swiftly abandoned the radical politics of the AIDS movement. No longer a fight for the universalization of health care and housing, the deprivatization of sexuality, or the guarantee of social insurance benefits regardless of compliance with the norms of bourgeois domesticity, the LGBTI movement now demanded inclusion within the dwindling privileges and entitlements afforded by

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<sup>14</sup> I have selected Lee Edelman's and Judith Butler's work because they are considered to be representative of two dominant strands of queer theory. According to Hennessy (2018: 53), one strand of queer theory comprises the 'avant-garde queer theory' of Lee Edelman, Diana Fuss, and others that developed in the early nineties and takes a 'textual approach to identity as signification.' This strand is being replaced by a second, more materialist queer academic discourse represented by scholars like Michael Warner, Judith Butler, David Halperin, and Jasbir Puar. It seeks to bring into clearer view 'the social and political dimensions of sexuality' (ibid.).



marital status. The AIDS crisis became remembered as ‘a traumatic but necessary rite of passage into the world of family responsibility’ (ibid.: 214) — that is, a hard-earned moral lesson about the neoliberal virtues of monogamy and personal responsibility, and a public affirmation of legitimate forms of (both biological and economic) reproduction. This context placed exceptional pressure on previously pathologized and criminalized queers to narrate themselves as healthy, responsible, deserving citizens, consumers, parents. Legitimate reproduction, including procreation, was an essential condition for the formation of this new ideal gay consumer. No wonder, then, that the figure of the child would become inscribed as the apotheosis of neoliberal ethics.

This historical context encourages us to read the opening of *No Future* as a vindication of the resistance politics of the AIDS activist movement — carrying forward an anti-normative, ‘uninsurable’ commitment to promiscuity, pleasure, and collectivity in a moment of neoliberalism’s foreclosure of such political horizons. Edelman expresses his political commitment thus:

[T]he fantasy subtending the image of the Child invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought. That logic compels us, to the extent that we would register as politically responsible, to submit to the framing of political debate — and, indeed, of the political field — as defined by the terms of [...] reproductive futurism: terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations.

(Edelman, 2004: 2)

Reproductive futurism, centered on the sacralized figure of the Child, renders the possibility of a political intervention outside reproduction, normative kinship, and moral conservatism unimaginable. It therefore follows that queers, due to their exclusion from procreation and inheritance, are positioned as the *negation* of the future. This is the reason, according to Edelman, that their hedonistic pursuits are seen as destructive of social order and indeed life itself. This polemic can easily be read as a call for

queers to repudiate reproductive futurism by embracing their association with the subversion of the framework of legitimate reproduction and inheritance. It should therefore be possible, following José Muñoz (2019), to detect a flicker of hope and utopianism within the text. This reading poses a number of questions: Might we imagine ways of creating a new world *non*-reproductively and *anti*-socially? Might a rejection of the neoliberal logics of privacy and property, validated through marital and familial status, disrupt the social structures through which ‘the future’ is transmitted? Might it even amount to a demand for a collective inheritance of ‘the future?’

This is not, however, the line of argumentation that Edelman pursues. His analysis departs from its socio-historical context to enter a dehistoricized realm of death drives, signifying relations, and laws of the Symbolic. For Edelman (2004: 25), queerness ‘is never a matter of being or becoming but, rather, of embodying the remainder of the Real internal to the Symbolic order.’ Put more plainly, Edelman transhistoricizes ‘the queer’ as a negating force that opposes or deauthenticates *every* social order. And with this move, he renounces any utopian impulse in his text. About the rejection of reproductive futurism, Edelman explicitly states: ‘I do not intend to propose some “good” that will thereby be assured. I mean to insist that nothing, and certainly not what we call the “good,” can ever have any assurance at all in the order of the Symbolic.’ The visions of sexual liberation and freedom that were embedded in the actions of radical queer activists throughout the eighties and nineties, and partly inherited from the era of the gay liberation movement, would have to be conceived, if we follow Edelman, as inherently *un*-queer in their commitment to the realization of a new governing order of meaning and social organization.

If the structural adjustments of neoliberalism within the imperial core led Edelman to a concern with the question of the social, they can be said to have oriented Judith Butler toward the question of the human. Who counts as human, has been a recurring, and perhaps the dominant, motif in Judith Butler’s work since the publication of their groundbreaking text *Gender Trouble* in 1990. They approach it through various different analytics, including intelligibility, juridical status, and grievability. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler poses the question of ‘the human’ in terms of who constitutes an *intelligible* life. There is what Butler (1990: 24) refers to as a ‘matrix of intelligibility’ that

determines the cultural and historical boundaries of sex/gender. Butler (ibid.: 23) writes: “‘Intelligible’ genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire.’ In other words, there are certain normative gender presuppositions — that is, gender norms such as ‘ideal dimorphism, heterosexual complementarity of bodies, ideals and rules of proper and improper masculinity and femininity’ — to which an individual must conform in order to be ‘intelligibly human’ (ibid.: xxiv-xxv). They are arguing that individuals are humanized, and that their bodies become ‘real’ and legitimate, insofar as they perform gender according to socially instituted and maintained gender norms.

In the 1999 Preface, Butler (ibid.: xxiii) writes that their work continues to be concerned with certain questions that were raised in *Gender Trouble*, including: ‘[W]hat will and will not constitute an intelligible life, and how do presumptions about normative gender and sexuality determine in advance what will qualify as “the human” and “the livable?”’ Indeed, in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, Butler (2000: 41) asks once again: ‘How do we understand what it is to be a “human?”’ Here, they are interested in the moment when a group that is constitutively excluded from the category of ‘human’ makes a demand for human rights. In Butler’s words (ibid.: 38), this group is enacting a ‘performative contradiction,’ because the demand to be recognized as ‘human’ exposes the limited reach of that very category. As an example, Butler (ibid.: 39) refers to the discourse on ‘lesbian and gay human rights’ and ‘women’s human rights,’ stating: ‘[T]he “human” as previously defined has not readily included lesbians, gays, and women, and the current mobilization seeks to expose the conventional limitations of the human.’

In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler (2004: 20) reiterates: ‘The question that preoccupies me in the light of recent global violence is, Who counts as human?’ In this text, Butler (ibid.: xiv) engages with what they term ‘the differential allocation of grievability’ — that is, the unequal production of who counts as ‘human’ understood in terms of whose life is *grievable*. In *Frames of War*, Butler elaborates their claim from *Precarious Life* that ‘if a life is not grievable, it is not quite a life’ (ibid.: 34). They point out that a life can only be said to carry value if the loss of that life would matter. There is no reason to mourn a valueless life. Therefore, Butler (2009: 15) argues that grievability is a necessary

condition for a life that matters: ‘Without grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life.’ A life is not grievable if it never counted as a life in the first place. Importantly, Butler (ibid.: 4) reminds us that a life cannot be grieved unless it is first *recognized* as a life within certain epistemological frames. These frames of understanding ‘work to differentiate the lives we can apprehend from those we cannot (or that produce lives across a continuum of life)’ (ibid.: 3). Butler (ibid.: 23) is here gesturing towards the ontological precariousness of human life and bodies, by which is meant that ‘we are, as it were, social beings from the start, dependent on what is outside ourselves, on others, on institutions, and on sustained and sustainable environments.’

This notion of precariousness as a differentially distributed yet shared condition of humanity — captured throughout their work with a range of terms including grievability, mourning, relationality, and vulnerability — has been the linchpin of Judith Butler’s interrogation of the question of the human. It has also garnered critical attention (see Vázquez-Arroyo, 2008; Dean, 2009; Watson, 2012; Danewid, 2017; Vishmidt, 2020). The postcolonial scholar Ida Danewid (2017) has charged Butler’s work with an ‘erasure of history’ for privileging an ontological view of the interconnectedness of humankind in the place of a historical view of the ways that colonialism and imperialism continue to build the present. Danewid (ibid.: 1675) writes: ‘By focusing on abstract — as opposed to historical — humanity, these discourses [of loss, grief, and vulnerability] contribute to an ideological formation that disconnects connected histories and turns questions of responsibility, guilt, restitution, repentance, and structural reform into matters of empathy, generosity, and hospitality.’ Common to these critiques is a sense that Butler acquiesces to the realities of neoliberalism. The turn to a language of precariousness should not be surprising during a historical period when a growing proportion of the population is being stripped of social support and subjected to evermore precarious labor conditions. Indeed, the term precarity is frequently used as a shorthand for the experience of everyday life under neoliberalism. However, the claim that precarity has become *generalized* since the eighties is distinct from the claim that precarity is the *general* condition of all human existence. As Vishmidt (2020: 34-35) contends, by ontologizing precarity as the premise of human life, Butler risks eliding the question of how precarity is produced as a distinct feature of our neoliberal conjuncture. Since their

writings are ‘relatively lightly contextualised in socially and historically differentiated terms,’ Vishmidt (ibid.: 36) maintains, precarity and grievability appear in Butler’s thought as ontologically prior to the neoliberal regime that produces these conditions. This leads to a political impasse. If precariousness is constitutive of the human condition as such, it can never be overcome. This position would seem to surrender ground to the status quo.

How might Butler be read if their work were properly situated? Throughout their writing, Butler alludes to the formative role of the AIDS years on their thinking. In *Gender Trouble*, they include normative presuppositions about the boundaries of the body within those constructions that determine the intelligibility of human life. Queer people, Butler (1990: 180) writes, are placed “‘outside” the hegemonic order’ through their attachment to ‘certain kinds of bodily permeabilities unsanctioned by the hegemonic order.’ In the eighties, this association between homosexuality and stigmatized, ‘polluting’ forms of bodily exchange was strengthened by the figure of the ‘polluted’ homosexual AIDS patient (ibid.: 179). In *Precarious Life*, the AIDS epidemic appears as a recurring example of a crisis that exposed the unequal allocation of grief — claiming millions of lives that would never be mourned, that would remain unthought, unnamed, and ungrieved. In *Frames of War*, Butler (2009: 39) speaks briefly of AIDS activism as a form of resistance to the government’s regulation of grievability. Of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, a public memorial that was displayed in 1987 to remember the lives lost to AIDS, Butler (ibid.) writes: ‘It meant something to state and show the name, to put together some remnants of a life, to publicly display and avow the loss.’

A reappraisal of Butler’s work is made possible when it is read alongside the radical AIDS activism of the eighties and nineties. The critics of their work, as mentioned above, have objected to their contradictory treatment of precarity as both a problem (an inescapable condition of human existence) *and* a solution (the basis for a renewed cosmopolitan ethics). Watson (2012) insists: ‘Precarity is the problem, but precariousness is not the solution.’ My wager is that Butler’s analysis of precarity repeats the move that the AIDS activists made when they located sexual liberation in an *embrace* of promiscuity and eroticism. At a time when the porousness of human bodies, the precondition for the spread of a deadly virus, had become the pretext for the imposition of a crisis

regime at the epicenter of the US AIDS epidemic, which would in turn serve as a laboratory for the neoliberal reorganization of the global economic order, radical AIDS activists were shamelessly promoting that very condition as the basis of their freedom.

Notions of precarity, relationality, and vulnerability (and, indeed, of self-shattering and the death drive as they appear in Leo Bersani's and Lee Edelman's writings) can be understood as attempting a similar maneuver: to resist the privatizing logics of neoliberalism and the destruction of collective queer life, not by denying but by reveling in the permeability and porousness of human bodies. When Butler (2004: 20) writes that precarity follows 'from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure,' we need not understand them as ontologizing the insecurities and vulnerabilities that are engendered and exacerbated under neoliberalism. Rather, we might interpret their text dialectically: as neoliberal capitalism generalizes conditions of precarity, it also provides possibilities for the transcendence of that order. The imposition of precarity reveals the ways in which we are mutually implicated in each others' lives — through violence, coercion, and exploitation, yet also through desire, love, and collectivity. Neoliberalism thereby exposes the interconnectedness of our lives, enabling political imaginaries of a world built to sustain and nurture those connections. To posit precarity as a 'solution' is therefore not to capitulate to neoliberalism but rather to seize upon the utopian visions for its supersession that are immanent to a world of generalized precarity.

## Conclusion

The AIDS activists of the late eighties and early nineties confronted a different world than the gay liberationists and black lesbian feminists. The dreams of the anti-colonial liberation struggles of preceding decades were burst: instead of freeing people, the end of empires freed capital, extended proletarianization, implemented new practices of wealth extraction, limited freedom of movement, and obviated ongoing struggles against imperialism. In the global North, governments implemented neoliberal reforms that drastically reduced state investments in health care and social provision,

destroyed queer zones in cities, and elevated the moral virtues of monogamy, heterosexual marriage, private sex, and personal responsibility. Nevertheless, the radical AIDS activists did not abandon the gay liberationist and black feminist commitment to sexual liberation. Rejecting the ultimatum between sexual freedom and health, these activists reaffirmed the eroticization of everyday life, the erosion of restrictive gender and sexual roles, and sexual promiscuity as central to the preservation of collective, vibrant queer life.

This chapter has explored how the critical knowledges and practices of the AIDS activist movement emerged in response to and resistance against the integration of the neoliberal order. The first section focused on the transnational connections that AIDS activists forged through their Central American solidarity work, which allowed them to draw connections between anti-militarism and health activism, and through their campaigning on behalf of 300 HIV-positive Haitian refugees detained on Guantánamo Bay, which highlighted the relationship between the hardening of state borders, the exploitation of migrant labor, and the destruction of social infrastructures. The second section then illustrated how radical AIDS activists counterposed their utopian visions of sexual liberation to neoliberalism's privatization of sexuality as it was enforced through real estate speculation, property development, and increased policing.

The second half of the chapter provides an account of queer theory's institutionalization within the academy from the early nineties onwards. It argues that the discipline of queer theory had a complex relationship to the developments of neoliberal capitalism, as well as to the AIDS activist movement detailed in the first half of the chapter. The main difficulty in assessing this relationship is created by queer theory's own mystification of its specific history, its institutional constraints and pressures, and its theoretical dispositions. This arises due to its treatment of anti-disciplinarity and mobility as constitutive features of the field, which themselves can become worryingly congruent with dominant forms of neoliberal consciousness. I argue that it is only through a historicization of queer theory — that is, an excavation of the broader social relations which made the institutionalization of queer theory possible in the first place — that a fuller picture of the field's limitations and critical potentialities emerges. Accordingly, the final section attempts a counter-reading of two canonized

queer theorists' work to demonstrate how the radical political impulses of queer academic scholarship come to light most clearly through an appraisal of its relationship to the resistance politics of the AIDS activist movement.



## **IV. Politicizing Eros: Queerness, pleasure, and the modern capitalist state**

The subsumption of desire was central to the maintenance of American hegemony during the post-war era. It facilitated mass identification with ostensibly universal national ideals and obfuscated the gendered and sexualized hierarchies which guaranteed their universality. Under Fordism, the national ideal of suburban nuclear family life disavowed the estrangement of queer and racialized populations who were unable to assimilate to the prescriptions of this heteronormative nuclearity. The Fordist regime of accumulation rested on the assumption that not only could labor be rationally organized, but so too could the desires and pleasures associated with ‘family time.’ The commodification of leisure in the space of the home hence became central to the reinforcement of social integration. Under neoliberalism, the heteronormative family was privatized. That is, the family became a sacred and sanctified alternative to the Fordist welfare state. This national ideal of the private family masked the processes of dispossession, displacement, and death that constituted the underside of neoliberal gentrification, privatization, and redevelopment. Desire was once again subsumed under this social order, as affective investments in the private family secured the fantasy that it could guarantee enduring well-being and security. During both phases of US hegemony, the subsumption of desire in the historical process established an illusion of equivalence among members of the national body politic, while enabling the creation of particular racialized and non-normative gender and sexual hierarchies that were integral to the reproduction of US capital.

The instances of queer worldmaking that have been the subject of this study brought these ostensibly universal national ideals into crisis. Through the politicization of various forms of queerness (be it homosexuality, deviant familial arrangements, or pathologized sexual practices) at various sites within and beyond the borders of the nation-state, these transnational movements exposed the various forms of hierarchization and differentiation upon which the illusory universality of the US nation-state was predicated. Although their structures, strategies, and ideologies differed significantly, they shared

one distinguishing feature: the conviction that the (counter-)investment in bodily needs, sexual pleasures, and other forms of erotic enjoyment could constitute an essential practice in the struggle against domination. Queer worldmaking took shape around the supposed possibilities of resistance and liberation that could be derived from the pursuit of Eros.

This final chapter ventures a socio-theoretical analysis of forty years of queer worldmaking. I situate transnational queer movements in relation to specific phases in the historical evolution of United States hegemony and offer an assessment of their trajectory. More concretely, I consider how the gay liberationists, black lesbian feminists, and AIDS activists each attempted to negate the governing fictions of the capitalist state through a politics of Eros. These movements provided horizontal rearticulations of pleasure and connected those articulations to broader demands for social transformation. Queer worldmaking practices, then, demonstrate that the subsumption of desire and pleasure is never total or complete. Seizing upon the cracks within the complex and uneven integration of desire and pleasure within the social order, these projects of queer worldmaking were able to find opportunities for resistance and rebellion in the pursuit of Eros. The politics of pleasure is risky business: to follow the history of transnational queer worldmaking is to follow a radical sexual politics that contained emancipatory promises yet risked continual recuperation and subsumption.

### Sexual differentiation and the construction of national subjectivity

In 'On the Jewish Question,' Karl Marx (1843: 30) makes a distinction between the 'free states of North America' and European states like France and Germany. For him, the US state exists 'in its completely developed form,' that is, as a *political* state. This perfected state achieves an astonishing feat: it maintains all prevailing social differences of 'birth, social rank, education, occupation' whilst simultaneously concealing their continued existence. Marx (ibid.: 33) writes: 'Far from abolishing these effective distinctions, [the state] only exists so far as they are presupposed; it is conscious of being a political state and it manifests universality only in opposition to these elements.' The central concern of this text is the establishment of 'the political' as a distinct sphere, where man can appear as an

*abstract* citizen who is equivalent to all other citizens and has ‘emancipated’ himself from the *particular* differentiations that characterize his life in civil society. This political emancipation is ‘devious.’ Instead of abolishing those hierarchized social differences, it declares them to be ‘non-political’ distinctions and hence naturalizes them as its constituent foundation. Marx (ibid.: 45): ‘[M]an was not liberated from religion; he received religious liberty. He was not liberated from property; he received the liberty to own property. He was not liberated from the egoism of business; he received the liberty to engage in business.’ Whilst these social distinctions continue to exist within civil society, in the political sphere the individual is constituted as ‘the imaginary member of an imaginary sovereignty, divested of his real, individual life, and infused with an unreal universality’ (ibid.: 34). This ‘unreal universality’ of the state is constituted ‘above the particular elements’ of civil society. In other words, social distinctions are rendered presuppositions of the state.

‘On the Jewish Question’ offers an account of the modern capitalist state as a particular historical form that concealed and naturalized existing property relations by positing itself as the guarantor of each abstract citizen’s individual property rights. The modern capitalist state is not immutable. Its features are continuously reconfigured through social struggles and the contingencies of capitalist development. What distinguished the United States, for Marx, was its illusory universality: it appeared as a neutral administrative apparatus, rather than a form of class rule, racial oppression, and patriarchal domination. Its universal rights discourse of liberty, equality, and security presupposed and obscured the processes of enslavement, exploitation, domination, and violence that it formally abjured. This contradiction illuminates how a small minority of the population is able to represent its own interests as the interests of ‘civil society.’ The state *appears* universal and neutral on the basis of the identification of the conditions for class rule with the conditions for the reproduction of capitalist society as a whole.

Marx’s analysis in ‘On the Jewish Question’ provides a framework through which to understand the centrality of racialized, gendered, and sexualized differences to the reproduction of the modern capitalist state. The constitutive contradictions of the US nation-state described above have historically been negotiated through the articulation of supposedly universal subjectivities that are

capable of disavowing the racialized, gendered, and sexualized differences intrinsic to capital's reproduction. In *Aberrations in Black*, Roderick Ferguson captures the contradictions between state and capital thus:

While capital can only reproduce itself by ultimately transgressing the boundaries of neighborhood, home, and region, the state positions itself as the protector of those boundaries. As the modern nation-state has historically been organized around an illusory universality particularized in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and class, state formations have worked to protect and guarantee this universality. But in its production of surplus populations unevenly marked by a racialized nonconformity with gender and sexual norms, capital constantly disrupts that universality. As the state and heteronormativity work to guarantee and protect that universality, they do so against the productive needs and social conditions set by capital, conditions that produce nonheteronormative racial formations.

(Ferguson, 2004: 17)

Capital produces a differentiated population through various historical processes, including the construction of divisions of labor, the creation of a reserve army of labor, and the obstruction of class solidarity. These processes come into direct contradiction with the illusory universality of the nation-state. Grace Kyungwon Hong (2006) has outlined in detail how this contradiction between capital's production of differentiation and the state's declaration of universality and equivalence has been resolved by excluding racialized and non-normatively gendered and sexualized (that is, queer) populations from the category of the propertied citizen. Over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this exclusion was variously achieved through enslavement, settler colonialism, disenfranchisement, criminalization, and other means of dispossession. In short, the abstract, homogenized, and ostensibly universal category of the citizen subject mediated the contradictions between capital and state by disavowing the racialized, gendered, and sexualized differences that were necessary to the production of an exploitable workforce and surplus labor population. The nation-state, whilst professing neutrality

as the protector of the propertied citizen, therefore upheld the existing unequal property relations that privileged whiteness and the heteronormative bourgeois domestic sphere, and erased the dispossession, exclusion, and repression of those subjects who were denied access to citizenship (ibid.: 5).

Crucial to the occlusion of these axes of social hierarchy was the promise of inclusion. The category of the propertied citizen was supposedly available to all. As Hong (ibid.: 8) states: 'US narratives of development suggest that anyone in any circumstance can transcend their material social relations and become the mature, self-possessed propertied subject.' The illusory universality of the citizen subject is secured through a vertical relation of desire: the category of the propertied citizen is imbued with immense promise. Numerous projections, fantasies, and aspirations are attached to this category as individuals take comfort in its myth of universal availability, resolution, and integration. This vertical relation of desire, powerfully pledging an escape from the particularities of racialized and non-normatively sexual or gendered hierarchy into the universalized condition of national subjectivity, obscures the material histories of dispossession and domination which narratives of inclusivity assume as their constituent foundation. This contradiction, however, renders this relation of desire unstable. The promise of inclusion, resolution, and universality cannot be fully realized or sustained. It necessarily fails, creating openings for alternative, horizontal articulations of desire that demand a transformation of social relations. In short, whilst desire is captured to cultivate an illusory universality that conceals global hierarchies of domination, the fundamental contradictions of the modern capitalist state create cracks and opportunities for its political resignification.

Desire is therefore neither completely captured by the capitalist state, nor purely revolutionary. This ungovernability determined the direction and form of radical sexual politics. Before exploring the political articulations of desire, pleasure, and sexual freedom within gay liberationism, black lesbian feminism, and AIDS activism, this section homes in on the constructions of national subjectivity during the age of United States hegemony. When the United States established its dominance in the post-war period, it concealed its imperialist ambitions through the abstract universalism that Marx had noted in 'On the Jewish Question.' It formally disavowed the racial supremacy of the British and French empires, founding its expansion instead on an international framework of universal freedom,

equality, and private property codified within the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Two national subjectivities — the consumer and the child — served to subjugate populations to whom racialized, gender, and sexualized difference was attributed, whilst obscuring that that very process of attribution was the precondition for the universality of national subjectivity. The first construction, the consumer, corresponds to the post-war Fordist mode of production, and the second, the child, to the consolidation of the neoliberal mode of production following the crisis of the mid-seventies. In a highly schematic history of the second half of the twentieth century, this section outlines the emergence of each of these distinct yet universalized national subjectivities, their predication upon forms of sexualized difference, and their imbrication within global relations of capital accumulation.

### *The consumer*

In the post-war decades, Fordism gave rise to the abstract category of ‘the consumer’ to resolve the tensions and contradictions between US state and capital. Hong (2006: 73) explains that the Fordist era ‘aimed to produce an undifferentiated, homogeneous worker whose embodied, human differences and particularities are foreclosed in the workplace and relegated to the space of the home, which then was to accrue new significance as the site for consumerist individualism.’ The principle underpinning Fordism was that workers be able to consume the products they make. Workers were compensated for their subordination to the bureaucratized, maximally rationalized, and highly repetitive Fordist production process with higher wages and increased leisure time. The reconfiguration of workers as consumers, or what Kevin Floyd (2009: 156) has referred to as ‘a systemic, unprecedented coordination of mass consumption with mass production,’ therefore depended on the promise of an inclusive, universally accessible domesticity (Hong, 2006: 76). This promise produced the acceleration of consumer demand required to absorb the higher output of the post-war economic boom, and effectively neutralized the specter of working-class militancy. It was accompanied by the post-war reconsolidation of the gendered distinction between masculinized wage labor in the factory and feminized unwaged activities in the domestic sphere.

The cultivation of particular desires and pleasures associated with ‘leisure’ were central to the reproduction of this social order. Theodor Adorno (1969: 189) is perhaps the most influential theorist of the relationship between Fordist consumerism and pleasure, of the absorption of desires and pleasures into consumerism. Through the degradation of free time into ‘a continuation of the forms of profit-oriented social life,’ Fordist consumerism commodifies and distorts even the most intimate experiences of pleasure, from reading to listening to music. In their essay ‘The Culture Industry,’ Horkheimer and Adorno (1944: 95) argue that the subsumption of desire reinforces social integration: ‘[A] cycle of manipulation and retroactive need is unifying the system ever more tightly.’ The opposition of labor and leisure is deceptive, since wants and needs are fabricated so as to orient consumers according to the organization of production. A vertical relation of desire arises to secure the ‘reconciliation of general and particular, of rules and the specific demands of the subject’ (ibid.: 102). Here, Adorno and Horkheimer illuminate how the capture of desire guarantees the illusory universality of the capitalist state, or what they refer to as ‘the false identity of universal and particular’ (ibid.: 95). Echoing Marx, Adorno and Horkheimer write that under the rational organization of Fordism, ‘[e]veryone amounts only to those qualities by which he or she can replace everyone else: all are fungible, mere specimens’ (ibid.: 116-17).<sup>15</sup>

The implementation of the normative consumer ideal was to an extent conflated with the normative citizen ideal. Consumerist domesticity, Hong (2006: 89) writes, became tethered to Americanization: ‘[The] notion of the consumer voting with his (or rather, her) dollars created a utopian ideal of mass-based democracy. Simultaneously, echoing Ford ideologies, advertising campaigns [...] constructed a specifically American lifestyle that was attainable only through consumerism.’ Indeed, the effort to resocialize workers into a consumption norm produced a normative nuclear-family model of bourgeois domesticity that was sutured to Americanness,

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<sup>15</sup> Adorno is clear — and this is a point that is often missed in critiques of his work — that the commodification of culture and desire is never total. In his essay ‘Free Time,’ Adorno (1969: 196-97) notes: ‘It is obvious that the integration of consciousness and free time has not yet completely succeeded. The real interests of individuals are still strong enough to resist, within certain limits, total inclusion.’ This complete integration, he continues, cannot occur in a society ‘whose *inherent contradictions* persist undiminished’ (ibid.: 197, emphasis added).

citizenship, and whiteness. Within these decades, the worker's movement secured support from progressive members of the bourgeoisie by organizing its demands around an aspiration to respectable nuclear-family life. And whilst the extension of bourgeois domesticity to working-class people improved the living standards of millions of Americans and provided the basis for an affirmative working-class identity, working-class respectability was only accomplished through a clear distinction from racialized non-heteronormative surplus populations. Writes M. E. O'Brien (2020: 377): '[The] family form would provide a sexual and gender basis for white American identity and middle-class property ownership.' These normative prescriptions of consumerist domesticity pathologized, policed, and repressed those forms of domestic arrangement that failed to approximate the bourgeois nuclear family model. The racialized and non-normatively gendered and sexualized surplus populations who could not consume, or who consumed improperly, constituted the disavowed underside in the historical process through which the white working class acquired legibility and coherence (Hong, 2006: 91).

Far from guaranteeing homogeneity and equivalence, then, the normative ideal of the consumer depended on differentiation and hierarchization. Significantly, the historical emergence of all such national subjectivities is connected to and commensurate with global relations of imperialism, capitalist expansion, and empire, settler colonialism, and the transatlantic slave trade (Lowe, 2015). The construction of the normative consumer ideal under Fordism must therefore be understood as a project that is deeply imbricated in the orchestration of hierarchies, asymmetries, and exclusions not just domestically but on a world scale. This post-war national subjectivity coincided with a remarkable period of capitalist development during which the US dominated in military, technological, and economic power. The rise of US hegemony required a new ordering of the globe, premised on the universalization of the nation-state and of American values, that nonetheless entrenched the hierarchical social relations that underpinned the former era of empires.

This order was achieved through significant political and economic restructurings and enforced through expanding military expenditures. Politically, the new order replaced imperial-state sovereignty with national-state sovereignty: as the space of the British and French empires was rapidly



nationalized, dozens of formally independent, nationally sovereign states were established as the basis of the reorganized world economy (Sharma, 2020: 14-15). The principle of national self-determination and a universalism of private property and individual rights, enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights, provided the international framework for state formation across the globe (Harvey, 2005b: 55). Economically, this transformation consolidated the hegemony of the United States by opening up markets for land, labor, and resources that had formerly been enclosed within empires (Sharma, 2020: 16). The United States ‘became the main protagonist in projecting bourgeois power across the globe,’ as it harnessed the power of the post-war economic infrastructure — consisting of powerful international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, and organizations like the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) — to ‘coordinate economic growth between the advanced capitalist powers and to bring capitalist-style economic development to the rest of the non-communist world’ (Harvey, 2005b: 55). Militarily, it was through its predominance in collective security arrangements like the UN and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), assistance to internal security forces, espionage, and numerous other covert military operations that the US was able to ensure domestic stability, peace among capitalist states, and the containment of the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence (ibid.: 53).

This new order successfully dismantled empires and granted national forms of state sovereignty, yet simultaneously organized institutional structures for the expansion of capitalist social relations and established new methods of population management and border control. As Nandita Sharma (2020: 122) explains: ‘Across the planet, as much of the stuff of life was enclosed within capitalist markets — land and food being perhaps the most crucial — more and more people joined the ranks of the proletariat. The dramatic spread of capitalist social relations mirrored the expansion of nation-state power.’ Developmentalism — the pursuit of industrialization, urbanization, and state power as the basis for ‘economic modernization’ — was posited as the antidote to the deprivations of colonialism (McMichael, 2017: 46).

The expansionary aims of the US in the decades following the Second World War were masked through the universalization of the nation state, developmentalism, and consumerist domesticity. The illusory universalism of the American consumer ideal disavowed both the subjection of racialized and non-normatively gendered and sexualized populations within the metropole and the subjection of formerly colonized populations in the Third World. Under Fordism, national subjectivity defined as the consumer subject constituted its opposite through the category of the ‘uncivilized’ subject who could not cultivate the proper desires and needs dictated by American consumerist domesticity. Hong (2006: 77) describes the imperial condition accordingly as ‘consumerism without means.’

### *Crisis*

The seventies were marked by a fundamental rupture as Fordism entered into crisis and the neoliberal reorganization of state and capital was set into motion. Western states faced inflationary pressures, collapsing property markets, stagnant economic growth, and rampant unemployment. One precipitating factor was imperial overreach: US military expenditures for the disastrous war in Vietnam continued to rise at exceptional rates, making the ongoing military ventures to contain the spread of Communism unsustainable. Another factor was the ability of former colonies to hike up their export commodity prices, seen most dramatically in the 1973 oil embargo proclaimed by the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in retaliation for the United States and other nations’ support for Israel during the Yom Kippur War (Cooper, 2017: 26). World-wide decolonization posed economic and political challenges to the American world order despite proceeding via the universal right to self-determination enshrined within the Charter of the United Nations. First, the extension of Fordist consumption norms to the working classes of advanced economies strained the world supply of raw materials and labor. Second, this increased demand for primary inputs enhanced the strategic power of dozens of newly sovereign states (Arrighi, 2010: 332). The military and legitimacy crises of the United States following the withdrawal of troops from Vietnam therefore signaled a dramatic

reversal in the configuration of world power in favor of the Second and Third World — one which the OPEC states were quick to exploit in the 1973 oil embargo (ibid.: 332-33).

When coupled with the existing level of state expenditures on physical and social infrastructure, as well as rising wage rates, these factors launched the US into a fiscal crisis that culminated in the virtual bankruptcy of New York City in 1975 (Harvey, 2005b: 60-61). A set of neoliberal policy reforms, commonly referred to as the Washington Consensus, was pursued as a response to the collapse of the economic system. These policies — first trialed by the US-backed military dictatorship of Augustine Pinochet in Chile following the overthrow of its left-wing government in 1973 — comprised regressive taxation, deregulation, privatization, trade liberalization, and the repression of political opposition (Worth, 2015: 91-92). They dismantled social welfare, steadily eroded wage gains and levels of labor unionization, extended private property rights, and reduced state investment in education, health care, and infrastructure (Sharma, 2020: 149). In the US, neoliberal monetary policy led to an upsurge in asset prices while wages lagged behind consumer price inflation. In other words, due to asset price appreciation, the rich saw their wealth increase at an astonishing pace whilst everyone else saw their wealth decline in real terms (Cooper, 2017: 133-35).

This period of rupture was followed by the neoliberal state's sublation of the social volatility and crisis of the seventies into a new source of profit. Neoliberal accumulation strategies generated a new set of contradictions that had to be managed and concealed. At the same time that neoliberalism provided some racialized and non-normative groups with hitherto unimaginable access to capital and citizenship, it also pronounced new logics that marked entire surplus populations as disposable. As Hong (2011: 92) explains, the differentiated populations of the previous era that were formerly surplus to production became surplus to the neoliberal economies of speculation and circulation: 'While labor exploitation is certainly still important, certain populations are not destined ever to be incorporated into capitalist production as labor.' In the moment that various minority groups were attaining legal and representational victories, a reorganized social order was also instituting new forms of immiseration, dispossession, and death. For examples we can look to the booming US prison-industrial complex that served as an investment outlet for the absorption of overaccumulated capital and as a site

to warehouse black laborers who had formerly been employed by heavy industries that have since been offshored (Gilmore, 2007: 30-86), or to real-estate speculation that gentrified formerly public and accessible spaces of queer sociality (Floyd, 2009: 195-226).

### *The child*

A new national subjectivity emerged to resolve these reconfigured contradictions between state and capital: the figure of the child. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner chronicle the construction of the innocent, idealized child as the icon of the nation as follows:

In law and political ideology, for example, the fetus and the child have been spectacularly elevated to the place of sanctified nationality. The state now sponsors stings and legislation to purify the internet on behalf of children. New welfare and tax ‘reforms’ passed under the cooperation between the Contract with America and Clintonian familialism seek to increase the legal and economic privileges of married couples and parents. Vouchers and privatization rezone education as the domain of parents rather than citizens. Meanwhile, senators such as Ted Kennedy and Jesse Helms support amendments that refuse federal funds to organizations that ‘promote, disseminate, or produce materials that are obscene or that depict or describe, in a patently offensive way, sexual or excretory activities or organs, including but not limited to obscene depictions of sadomasochism, homo-eroticism, the sexual exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sexual intercourse.’

(Berlant and Warner, 1998: 550)

The restoration of the imagined American nation proceeds by way of what Lauren Berlant (1997: 3) refers to as ‘the privatization of citizenship,’ that is, ‘the Reaganite view that the intimacy of citizenship is something scarce and sacred, private and proper, and only for members of the family.’ The nation’s survival is seen to depend on the individual citizen’s investment in the heteronormative family,

legitimate procreation and reproduction, marriage, and private sex. Neoliberalism roots citizenship in the private institutions of the home. The neoliberal common sense held, Berlant (ibid.: 6) explains, that imagining the national project on behalf of the innocent child ‘contains the blueprint for the reproductive form that assures the family and the nation its future history.’ The universalized figure of the child therefore embodied the ideal national subject for whom the social order must be reproduced. As President Clinton’s March 1997 advertising campaign proclaimed: ‘We’re fighting for the children. Whose side are you on?’ A *New York Times* piece described the campaign as presenting Bill Clinton ‘as the defender of children’ (Bennet, 1997).

The preservation of neoliberalism’s privatization of citizenship was dependent on the production of affective attachments to the private family as a fantasy of the good life. Lauren Berlant (2011: 2) has influentially argued that neoliberalism is sustained through abounding relations of ‘cruel optimism,’ relations of desire towards objects that constitute an obstacle to human flourishing and freedom. This mode of desire gone awry is generative of pleasures that endure even when it threatens the possibility of a dignified existence. The private family constitutes one such relation. Under neoliberalism, this institution is increasingly unable to deliver on the promise of stability, displaying instead ‘a variegated pattern of precarity: informal coupling, serial marriage, delayed marriage, and single life’ (Chitty, 2020: 22). Nonetheless, even as the family form erodes and exhausts itself in the present, citizens continue to confirm and repeat their affective attachments to its normative fantasies (ibid.: 166-67). For Berlant, desire is therefore central to the preservation of the private family. Desire for the family form abounds as the form itself is increasingly unable to secure for its members the basic conditions of life.

The parallel to Adorno’s account of the culture industry’s fabrication of needs is clear. For Berlant (ibid.: 168), the cultivation of pleasures under neoliberalism reinforces social integration: ‘What might have been political agency is diffused throughout the social, as the work of the reproduction of life absorbs most of the energy and creativity people have; and so much of it is absorbed by the dramas of the tattered family, the lone institution of reciprocity remaining here for fantasy to attach itself to.’ As the possibility of structural transformation appears as an ever-receding

horizon, the dissatisfaction of individuals is reinvested in neoliberalism's conventional forms since they are able to generate cruel circuits of desire and pleasure at the same time that they deliver exploitation and dispossession. We might reformulate Berlant's central thesis as follows: As governing fictions of upward social mobility, meritocracy, job security, and durable familial life became increasingly unattainable under the neoliberal social order, the cultivation of desires for these fictions became a central strategy for the reproduction of this self-undermining social order. As under Fordism, the subsumption of desire and pleasure under neoliberalism becomes central to the reproduction of capitalist society.

As with the normative ideal of the consumer subject, the sanctification of the child within the private family displaces the constitutive hierarchies and divisions of the social order. The universalism of the child is, of course, an illusion. The future that the nation is seen to secure does not belong equally to all children. José Muñoz (2019: 95) describes the national icon of the child accordingly as a figure of 'normative white reproductive futurity.' The child is also, Sara Ahmed (2017: 80) argues, 'the story of the subaltern,' that is, a racialized figure of colonial and imperial rule. The child, as other ostensibly universal national subjectivities before it, proposes inclusivity whilst innovating racialized, gendered, and sexualized forms of division and hierarchy. Indeed, the dispossession and disappearance of certain populations (such as those living with AIDS, crossing national borders, experiencing homelessness, incarcerated within a rapidly growing prison industrial complex, or hit by the heroin and crack epidemics) becomes a condition of possibility for the illusory universalism of its own normative ideal (the child shielded within his zone of domestic privacy). Understanding how this process effects and disavows differentiation is crucial to grasping how the national icon of the child is employed in the expansionary aims of the nation-state and capital accumulation. As Berlant (1997: 4) describes it, this is a process of 'a national people imagining itself national only insofar as it feels unmarked by the effects of these national contradictions.'

The pronouncement of this privatized national subjectivity was, once again, embedded within global relations of violence and hierarchy. David Harvey has argued that 'accumulation by dispossession' — a phrase that expands on Marx's definition of 'primitive accumulation' — constitutes

a central feature of this restructured neoliberal global order. His explanation of accumulation of dispossession places privatized citizenship within the context of neoliberalism's broader strategy of profitable destruction:

What accumulation by dispossession does is to release a set of assets (including labour power) at very low (and in some instances zero) cost. Overaccumulated capital can seize hold of such assets and immediately turn them to profitable use. In the case of primitive accumulation as Marx described it, this entailed taking land, say, enclosing it, and expelling a resident population to create a landless proletariat, and then releasing the land into the privatized mainstream of capital accumulation. Privatization (of social housing, telecommunications, transportation, water, etc. in Britain, for example) has, in recent years, opened up vast fields for overaccumulated capital to seize upon. [...] [I]f capitalism has been experiencing a chronic difficulty of overaccumulation since 1973, then the neo-liberal project of privatization of everything makes a lot of sense as one way to solve the problem.

(Harvey, 2005b: 149-50)

By releasing assets held by the state into the market, where overaccumulated capital can then seize upon and invest in them, privatization is able to create access to new sources of profit for the capitalist class. This process — that is, the devaluation of assets, followed by their re-entry into the circulation of capital — requires a crisis. Outside of the West, such crises are often visited upon certain sectors or entire states by force. Indeed, Harvey (*ibid.*: 151) defines IMF-led structural adjustment programs as the orchestration of predatory devaluations that are managed 'in ways that permit accumulation by dispossession to occur without sparking a general collapse.'

The devaluation of labor power and deterioration of working-class life in the United States and other Western states was mirrored by a vast expansion in the supply of labor across the so-called 'developing' world as agricultural economies were destroyed and displaced peasants moved into urban slums (*ibid.*: 63). International institutions such the IMF and World Bank, at the behest of the United

States, made loans conditional on the implementation of neoliberal policy reforms within borrowing states — policies whose formulation was predicated on the same universalized institutions of normative heterosexuality and privatized citizenship as sketched above (Griffin, 2007). These structural adjustment programs, as they became known, encompassed ‘rising interest rates limiting the availability of credit, cuts in subsidies to agricultural sectors [...], reversals of any previous land reforms, approval of resource extraction and mega-development projects [...], removal of export duties and import tariffs, and further mobilization of capital as massive outward transfers of profits by corporate subsidiaries were permitted’ (Sharma, 2020: 150). These loans became a crucial source of revenue for states in the global South, causing massive indebtedness, forcing capital markets open, and dramatically increasing the supply of labor available to capital.

It was the collapse of the Soviet Union that completed the global reorganization of the American world order. The end of the Cold War marked the defeat of the only official ideological rival to the United States — illustrated during the first Gulf War, which the United States led with the backing of a virtually undivided international community following a unanimous UN Security Council resolution — and the globalization of capitalist trade and production. Although capital mobility was liberated in this post-Cold War environment, human mobility was increasingly restricted and regulated. Neoliberal globalization portended the enactment of new citizenship and immigration controls. These controls were more economized than they had been in previous decades: a regime of differentiated rights and entitlements, constructed on the explicit basis of market criteria, disciplined migrant labor and produced greater competition between migrant and citizenized workers (McNevin, 2014: 649). Western states implemented and brutally enforced point-based systems, guest worker programs, and other strategies of restricting (and criminalizing) immigration. These made migrants evermore subject to super-exploitation in the most precarious sectors of the labor market (in particular, cleaning services, nursing, and the food processing industry) (Cross, 2021: 58). This neoliberal border regime, Sharma (2020: 166) notes, ‘turns Migrants into a specific *labor market category* available to capital within nation-states.’ It was anchored in part through the regulatory function of the heteronormative family. A majority of migrants entered the US through the category of ‘family



reunification,’ a category that incorporates migrant workers — predominantly young, racialized women — into labor markets and conditions them for low-wage, casual work. Hong (2006: 113) explains that family-based immigration laws maintain ‘a hyper-exploitable, vulnerable workforce of immigrants’ by ‘mak[ing] immigrants dependent on their family members for residency and citizenship status and limit[ing] these women’s ability to negotiate their working conditions because they often work for the very relatives who are sponsoring their immigration.’ As such, the private family constitutes ‘a category of exploitation for the noncitizen immigrant’ (Hong, 2011: 94). In short, the transnationalization of capital and corporate power was concurrent with the greater policing and militarization of the state border. This simultaneous permeability and impermeability of national boundaries characterized the neoliberal mode of accumulation.

This chapter argues that the transnational projects of queer worldmaking under consideration in this study, in distinct ways, politicized the sexual differences that had to be occluded for the nation-state’s promise of inclusion into bourgeois domesticity to be rendered legible and coherent. Each movement constituted itself as a site for the critique of the nationalist epistemology of the capitalist state, revealing it as a site of violence, exploitation, and antagonism rather than resolution, equivalence, and inclusivity. Crucially, they were able to expose US capital’s historical dependence upon hierarchization through a *horizontal* rearticulation of desire and pleasure. That is, they sought to reject the vertical relations of desire that secure the illusory universality of national ideals. This rejection occurred through the prescription of Eros — understood expansively as the exploration and embrace of unsanctioned pleasures and desires, of non-heteronormative kinship structures, of alternative relations of care and love, of bodily autonomy and sexual freedom — as a revolutionary horizon. At times, these struggles were able to elaborate the specific pleasures associated with the pursuit of Eros as ‘properly’ political, as what Fredric Jameson (2008: 385) calls ‘a figure of the transformation of social relations as a whole.’ At other times, their articulation of desire and pleasure was susceptible to recuperation and subsumption by the capitalist state. Neither straight-forwardly revolutionary nor entirely integrated, the ungovernability of desire fundamentally shaped the character of the gay liberationist, black lesbian feminist, and AIDS activist movements.

## Eros against consumerist domesticity: Fordism and the gay liberation movement

By the onset of the twentieth century, bourgeois intimate arrangements — stable family formations, marriage and the couple form, property inheritances, parenting customs — had achieved moral hegemony beyond the privileged classes. This sexual order faced multiple crises and social upheavals that threatened to erode its hegemony over the course of the century (Chitty, 2020: 22-23). Economic depression and two world wars flattened social hierarchies, facilitated the establishment of homosexual enclaves in cities, disinhibited sexual mores, and disrupted nuclear-family life. In North America and Western Europe, the wide-ranging social disruption of World War II was followed by a highly uneven and contradictory era of post-war prosperity (Escoffier, 1998: 44-47). On the one hand, it witnessed a reconsolidation of the ‘traditional’ sexual and gender regime through the restoration of the male-led private nuclear family, extreme pro-natalism, and suburbanization. On the other hand, women were impelled to re-enter the labor force after demobilization (as supplemental income was needed to meet new consumer expectations and maintain the post-war standard of living), emergent urban underground cultures fostered new social identities and expressions, and moral panics about sexual deviancy and pathology (such as the ‘Lavender Scare’) erupted. In other words, post-war developments simultaneously enabled the creation of variegated sexual cultures and introduced punitive measures in response to curb these visible cultures of sexual and gender deviancy. The reconsolidation of the bourgeois family unit became necessary for the rationalization of the production process and disciplining of a regimented labor force (Chitty, 2020: 173).

This post-war period of capitalist development corresponds to the adoption of the Fordist regime of intensive accumulation across the US and Western Europe. The United States enjoyed an unparalleled concentration of productive capacity: in 1948, its national income was more than twice that of Britain, France, Germany, Italy and the Benelux countries, and more than six times that of the USSR (Arrighi, 2010: 284). That same year, under the Marshall Plan, the United States transferred \$13 billion of aid to Western European economies, initiating ‘the remaking of Western Europe in the

American image' (ibid.: 305). The post-war reconstruction of advanced industrial states institutionalized mass production and consumption on a vast geographic scale and occurred under US auspices — administered by the post-war international economic and political infrastructure and supported by major US labor organizations (Rupert, 1995). Consumerist domesticity was the anchor of this regime's sexual division of labor within the private household. While men provided the main income for their families, women were tasked with responsibilities such as child and elderly care, domestic chores, the consumption of household appliances, and various other unwaged activities. The nuclear family model thus became the 'key social unit in which productivist discipline was reinvigorated' and was undergirded by welfare provisions, tax reductions, and widely available loans and mortgages (Farris, 2017: 133). This model of consumerist domesticity was, of course, disciplinary. I use the term phrase 'consumerist domesticity' to draw attention to the gradual shift from the family as a unit of production to a unit of consumption under Fordism. As Floyd (2009: 53) explains, the Fordist regime of intensive accumulation required the management of consumption to ensure that demand matched increases in productivity. Families were hence socialized into regulatory consumption norms. These new consumption standards enforced and ossified the binary separations of labor and leisure, production and consumption, public and private, man and woman, masculinity and femininity, and so on.

The Fordist organization of consumerist domesticity relied on the orchestration and directing of desires and pleasures. Kevin Floyd, proposing a historicized reading of Judith Butler's work the heterosexual matrix of desire, argues that it was only within the context of consumerist domesticity that masculinity and femininity began to operate within an economy of desire. Under previous regimes of accumulation, Floyd (2009: 87) argues, *manhood* 'referred to an "inner quality," a capacity for independence, morality, and self-mastery' — a capacity that was considered unavailable to those constitutionally unable to contain their sexual urges, including racialized groups, sex workers, and some working-class white men — and *womanhood* was defined in terms of sexual object status. The primary constitutive feature of gender roles was not the orientation of desire towards an acceptable sexual object, but rather physiology. It was only under Fordism that manhood and womanhood were

reconfigured as masculinity and femininity, 'defined wholly in relation to each other, bound together [...] in the very opposition between their accepted and prohibited objects of desire' (ibid.: 88). Gender roles are now constituted through the proper direction of desire towards acceptable sexual objects and consumer habits.

One founding promise of consumerist domesticity was that the laborer be compensated for the subordination to the Fordist production process with more leisure time. This promise created an illusion of freedom, disalienation, and bodily autonomy: the labor that the male worker performed within the domestic sphere (be it yard work, fishing, maintaining the car, or fixing furniture items) was not directly mediated by capital. Leisure activities were not performed for a boss, but for one's self. Consumerist domesticity, Floyd (ibid.: 110) writes, promised 'the time and money to escape the world of routinized, alienated labor,' but was itself 'an arena of false immediacy that is already itself a fully marketed, capital-intensive space.' Adorno (1969: 194) thus expressed leisure as 'a shadowy continuation of labour.' Masculinity became constituted in the sphere of consumption, rather than production, as men were socialized into specific, gendered consumption norms, household tasks, and leisure activities. Binary gender and sexual differentiation became a way to normalize consumption within the domestic sphere and secure men's acquiescence to an intensive regime of accumulation.

It is in this sense that gender under Fordism can be said to assume a 'performative' quality. It relied on the active direction of desire towards appropriate sexual objects and consumption patterns. The subsumption of desire was therefore integral to the functioning of the Fordist social order. The establishment of its sexual division of labor within the nuclear family required the institution of particular forms of state power. Many groups were still unable to assimilate to the disciplinary norms of consumerist domesticity, such as racialized women who worked outside the home, sexual deviants who had fled the violence of the family, men at the bottom tiers of the working class for whom the family wage was inaccessible, and the subjects of (former) colonies. The state instituted new forms of repression and dispossession to enforce these norms. As such, gay liberation emerged not as a movement directed against a timeless ideology of repression or sentiment of phobia, but rather as a struggle against organized state oppression that 'was largely the product of an expanded state

bureaucracy, increased police power, and capital's twentieth-century concern for the welfare and health of working populations' (Chitty, 2020: 23). A powerful and intensely phobic clinical psychoanalytic establishment, which viewed homosexuality as the outcome of dysfunctional family environments, was in alignment with these forces of post-war state repression (Floyd, 2009: 128). The forces of economic crisis, social upheaval, and subsequent state repression were endemic to most high-income countries of the mid-twentieth century. Significantly, the forces that were mobilized to rein in homosexuality were the same forces that were brought to bear on 'lawless,' often racialized, proletarian surplus populations in cities: police brutality, criminalization, imprisonment, forced labor, pathologization (ibid.: 36). Gay liberationism must therefore be understood as a movement whose demands, aims, and ideological coordinates were forged in the crucible of the Fordist state.

The gay liberation movement also emerged towards the end of a decade of mass uprisings and social unrest. Numerous anti-systemic struggles — including opposition to the Vietnam War, the Black Power movement, women's liberation, militant student organizing, countercultural revolutionary groups, as well as contemporaneous national liberation movements across the globe — exploded and threatened to erode the foundations of the hegemonic American moral order. The new forms of antagonism and antipathy that animated these insurrectionary formations were in large part a product of the expansion of the punitive apparatuses of Fordist states. It was within this context of global counterhegemonic struggle that cultures of same-sex desire were politicized. As Chitty (2020: 166) writes: 'Homosexuality was reconceptualized as an active, counterhegemonic appropriation of urban space generating unique forms of sociality and culture centered around stranger intimacy.' The identity marker 'gay,' which liberationists juxtaposed to the medicalized discourse of 'homosexuality,' signaled a sense of belonging rooted in shared experiences of state repression, violence, and exile. Ironically, it was the state's representation of homosexuality as a pervasive, insidious, spectral threat to the stability of the entire socio-political order that lent legitimation to the gay liberationists' invocation of homosexuality's revolutionary capacities. In short, state repression provoked a politicization of homosexuality by providing a basis for shared suffering and grievance. John D'Emilio (1983: 108) recounts: 'As the [gay and lesbian] subculture expanded and grew more visible in the post-World War II

era, oppression by the state intensified, becoming more systematic and inclusive. [...] Gay liberation was a response to this contradiction.’ It was amid wider forms of repression and dispossession linked to the normalization of the Fordist nuclear family that gays and lesbians established variegated political formations and generated new conceptions of sexual expression, identity, and liberation.

The utopian articulations of gay and lesbian liberation that are found in the writings of the late sixties and earlier seventies envision a negation of the disciplinary norms enforced by consumerist domesticity. As Chapter One demonstrated, gay liberationist writers such as Mario Mieli and Dennis Altman understood the characteristics of the post-war Fordist regime of intensive accumulation — that is, the reconsolidation of the nuclear family, the construction of binary gender and sexual identity, the socialization of workers into a highly productivist work ethic, and the coupling of mass production to mass consumption — as fundamentally premised on the repression of the ‘pansexuality,’ ‘transsexuality,’ or ‘innate bisexuality’ of the human. Appropriating and inverting Freud’s view of sexual development, they proposed that the social order was stabilized through a violent eradication of ‘polymorphous perversity.’ This explained the oppression of sexual deviants, those who dared to explore the natural condition of bisexuality. The solution, then, seemed clear: The emancipatory struggle against nation-state and capital could only be achieved through the unleashing of flamboyant displays of unrepressed and non-normative sexuality. The liberation from the increasingly tedious, deskilled, repetitive, and bureaucratized nature of labor under Fordism, from the sexual classifications and hierarchies intrinsic to capital’s reproduction, and from the repressive state apparatus meant first and foremost the liberation of Eros.

Chapter One showed that, for the liberationists, the cultivation of Eros entailed the abolition of alienated wage labor, the undoing of the distinctions between man and woman and between heterosexuality and homosexuality, and the eroticization of all areas of life. Sexuality would be free from the interests of economic development, imperialist war efforts, typologies of sexuality and gender, and bourgeois domesticity. This utopian envisioning of a future in which human beings would achieve a relationship to their bodies, their erotic lives, and their sexualities that was no longer mediated by capitalist social relations, occurred beyond the gay liberation movement. Similar themes are found in

the contemporaneous writings of the women's liberation movement. In her 1970 radical feminist manifesto *The Dialectic of Sex*, for instance, Shulamith Firestone wrote:

And just as the end goal of socialist revolution was not only the elimination of economic class *privilege* but of the economic class *distinction* itself, so the end goal of feminist revolution must be, unlike that of the first feminist movement, not just the elimination of male *privilege* but of the sex *distinction* itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally. (A reversion to an unobstructed *pansexuality* — Freud's 'polymorphous perversity' — would probably supersede hetero/homo/bi-sexuality.)

(Firestone, 1970: 11)

At the heart of this ideology stood the conviction that Eros carried revolutionary capacities. If the social order was predicated on the repression of unsanctioned sources of sexual desire, sensual joy, and erotic fulfillment, then the pursuit of these pleasures constituted an assault on the social order. However, the politics of desire during this period did not only produce revolutionary demands. Chapter One detailed the ways that desire was recuperated within existing social relations. In particular, it showed how certain strands within the gay liberation movement, termed 'assimilationist nationalism' and 'separatist nationalism,' reinforced vertical relations of desire. These strands disavowed their horizontal ties with contemporaneous struggles and instead invested immense political hope in the nation-state form as the vehicle through which to resolve the predicament of homosexual oppression. Their political demands were therefore disconnected from the revolutionary vision of a total transformation of global social relations. Furthermore, as critics such as Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2005) have noted, in the aftermath of these anti-systemic struggles, even the most revolutionary elements of their politics of pleasure were recuperated by the capitalist state. This politics, organized centrally around a critique of bureaucratized capitalism, conformity, and rigid divisions of labor, was absorbed by the new horizontal, flexible, and networked 'spirit' of neoliberal capitalism that promulgated values of creativity, individuality, and innovation. Their book illuminates

how specific pleasures are recuperated when they are severed from the political demand for widespread social transformation.

In a stage of capitalist development that witnessed the vast expansion of a punitive state apparatus, the gay liberationist view of subjugation as founded on repression might not come as a surprise. Nevertheless, it obviated a consideration of the complex ways that subjugation was not only based on the repression of pleasure, but also on the production, management, distribution, and deferral of pleasures. The relationship between power and pleasure became the subject of extensive discussion in the following decade. At the crux of Foucault's argument in his damning critique of gay liberationism, *The History of Sexuality*, was that a fixation on repression misapprehended the nefarious workings of power and in fact unwittingly strengthened the modern regime of sexuality. Foucault (1976) argued that the past three centuries had witnessed a multiplication of discourses and knowledges regarding sex, reproduced across numerous sites of regulation and administration. The modality of power that Foucault considers to be at work here is not a sovereign power that *represses* sex, but one that operates 'without a king' (ibid.: 89). It is 'produced from one moment to the next, at every point' and 'comes from everywhere' (ibid.: 93). Significantly, this meant for Foucault that any project for liberation must necessarily unfold within the deployment of sexuality — hence the irony of the belief that 'our "liberation" is in the balance' (ibid.: 159). This is particularly visible in the gay liberationist strategies of reversal, whereby they employed the same categories, terms, and concepts (like 'polymorphous perversity') of pathologizing psychoanalytic and medical discourse (ibid.: 101). Liberation, as David Halperin (1995: 20) explains Foucault, 'may have liberated our sexuality but it has not liberated us *from* our sexuality; if anything, it has enslaved us more profoundly to it. [...] In our present context, then, liberation movements bind us more closely to the very thing from which we may need most urgently to emancipate ourselves.' The notion of a repressed innate sexuality was predicated on the proposed existence of a sexual essence and bound liberationists closer to the very powers from which they sought emancipation.

By treating Eros as an unalloyed good — located prior to, outside of, or otherwise independent from the social order — the gay liberationists were able to invest it with immense political hope. But, as



Rosemary Hennessy (2018: 44) argues, there is a persistent strand of essentialism in their archetypes of polymorphous, perverse sexuality, and their Freudo-Marxist analysis of sexual liberation rests on the conception of Eros as an ahistorical, universal, pre-social, and autonomous energy that governs the human. Hennessy returns to Herbert Marcuse's work on Freud to chart the origins of the gay liberationists' dematerialized conception of Eros:

Marcuse's performance principle connects eros to the organization of work, but the relationship he draws between the organization of work and sexuality is finally oversimplified: under capitalism the libido is drained and used up by work, and sexuality/eros is relegated to leisure time and genital sex. This overly general analysis does not address the historically variant ways sexuality (even in its 'perverse' forms) pervades the workplace and the investment of monopoly capital in certain forms of sexual identity.

(Hennessy, 2018: 44)

Hennessy's argument is that sexuality, even in its 'perverse' forms, is not simply repressed or instrumentalized under the rule of capital. Rather, it is from the start integrated into capitalist social relations in uneven ways. The consequence is that the search for an abstract, untainted sexual essence that can be liberated, is futile.<sup>16</sup> In short, the gay liberationists' uncomplicated view of Eros as a mythic entity which carried the promise of radical transformation underestimated its potential for accommodation within the system. The ungovernability of desire and pleasure ultimately meant that their politics of pleasure was necessarily ridden with contradictions, opening new revolutionary horizons yet simultaneously susceptible to subsumption.

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<sup>16</sup> Herbert Marcuse attempted to overcome essentialism by treating Eros as the product of historical development. However, Simon Clarke (1991: 66) explains, this position is contradicted by Marcuse himself because he regards Eros as 'a critical force to the extent that it is *not* subsumed in the historical process.' Eros is understood as an authentic, transformative desire 'hidden in the human soul,' out of the reach of reification and commodification, rather than as emerging from the unfulfilled needs that capitalist society itself creates.

## Eros against empire: Crisis and the black lesbian feminist movement

The years following the rapid rise and fall of the gay liberation movement were marked by the breakup of Fordism. The crisis of this post-war regime of accumulation was eventually resolved through neoliberalism's reorganization of the world economy. It was during this phase of transition from the Fordist to neoliberal stage that black feminism emerged as a distinct intellectual and activist formation. The previous section situated the emergence of the gay liberation movement within the highly uneven and contradictory context of Fordist capital and state, when the simultaneous production and repression of racial, gendered, and sexual difference engendered a politicization of the various antagonisms, including homosexuality, that threatened to erode the foundations of the American moral order. The contestations of this decade revealed that racial and sexual formations were produced relationally, rather than in isolation, as threats to, or deviations from, the privileged bourgeois institutions of property and domesticity. The potential for unexpected coalitions between groups such as the gay liberationists and the Cuban revolutionaries arose from the alignment between populations who could not be incorporated into the disembodied and unmarked subject formations of the US nation-state, namely, perversely sexualized populations at home and colonial populations abroad. Black lesbian feminism highlighted similar unexpected coalitions through a critique of the prescriptions of heteronormativity as a form of domination experienced by racialized and queer communities alike.

In *Family Values*, Melina Cooper (2017) shows that the US response to the fiscal crisis and consumer price inflation in the seventies diagnosed one particular federal welfare program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), as the primary cause of the crisis. This diagnosis shattered a broad commitment to underwriting the heteronormative ideal of the family through redistributive welfare and to extending the family wage to African American men (ibid.: 32). This policy program was championed most famously by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who had proposed in the sixties that the persistence of disadvantages faced by black Americans (high unemployment rates, criminality, educational disparities, discrimination) was due to the defects of the black family structure: woman-led

households, high rates of divorce, and childrearing out of wedlock. Moynihan maintained that these conditions, viewed as pathologies with origins in the kinship structures of the slave economy, were causal factors in the reproduction of poverty and other disadvantages (ibid.: 38). Whilst in the sixties and early seventies, Democrats (including Moynihan himself) and Republicans were in agreement that the family wage should be extended to black constituencies in order to redress the apparent disintegration of the black family, after the crisis of the mid-seventies, in a stunning ideological inversion, a new bipartisan consensus emerged which posited the welfare state — for which the AFDC functioned as a metonymy — as contributing to inflationary pressures and undermining the moral fabric of American society (ibid.: 32).

As Cooper (ibid.: 30) explains, inflation was understood to have the effect of ‘shortening time horizons and inducing a desire for speculative indulgence among the consumer public,’ which would in turn result in ‘a general breakdown in public morality whose effects were visible in everything from expanding welfare rolls to sexual promiscuity.’ Rather than a vector for the instilment of family values, the welfare state became regarded as a radical threat to the American family. The latter was therefore to be privatized as an *alternative* to redistributive welfare. Cooper (ibid.: 51) argues that this drastic reversal in orientation, seen even amongst those Democrats who were considered to be the most progressive politicians of the sixties, was in part due to a backlash against radical movements, such as gay liberationism, that rejected the model of the heteronormative family — anchored as it was in ideals of bourgeois domesticity and consumerism. These movements became associated with an array of perverse pleasures and decadent desires that ran contrary to the Protestant virtues of productivism, frugality, and restraint upon which American society was said to be founded. Cooper (ibid.: 55) writes: ‘Little by little, the perverse logic of chrematistics had shifted from the market to the workplace to the household, generating limitless desires that challenged the traditional order of sexual relations — not to mention the fiscal viability of the state, which was now called upon to subsidize these non-normative ways of living.’ In short, sexual liberation became inseparable from fiscal crisis. AFDC welfare recipients, so the new common sense held, were incentivized to transgress the work ethic and heteronorms of the Fordist nuclear family, generating excessive moral expectations that would

precipitate inflation and economic breakdown (ibid.: 56). This discourse achieved a radical reconfiguration of domestic political forces, bringing former New Deal and Great Society liberals, neoliberals, and neoconservatives into alignment. The scene was set for Ronald Reagan's political ascent — a figure known for his opposition to the family wage and his commitment to reducing state funding for social welfare (ibid.: 63-65).

Chapter Two argues that the black lesbian feminists rejected the valorization of the heteronormative ideal of the family as a remedy for the crisis of the seventies, positing white supremacy as linked to the estrangement of racial formations from this supposedly universal heteronormative ideal. By revealing the prescriptions of heteronormativity as constitutively racialized, black lesbian feminism updated the gay liberationist contestation of heteronormativity for the political conjuncture of the seventies. The black lesbian feminists were able to persuasively draw connections between white supremacy and heteronormativity by locating the roots of their co-imbrication within the process of empire building. An integral component of the black lesbian feminist movement, Chapter Two demonstrated, was the conviction the binaristic organization of gender and sexuality within the West was itself a colonial imposition. In their view, non-white sexual formations, imagined as egalitarian and non-hierarchical, were destroyed as a precondition for the advancement of Western 'civilization.' The pathologization of non-heteronormative racial formations that the black lesbian feminists encountered in the seventies was thus understood as continuous with a long history of imperialist predation and colonial violence.

The affirmation of US empire was accordingly conceived as fundamentally incompatible with the pursuit of sexual freedom, erotic pleasure, bodily autonomy and self-determination, and love within non-heteronormative intimate arrangements. The emancipatory transformation of sexual life would therefore occur via anti-imperialist struggle. Chapter Two found the texts of numerous black lesbian feminist writers, including Cheryl Clarke, Audrey Lorde, and Cherríe Moraga, to be suffused with a conception of heteronormativity as aiding the project of empire, and a conception of Eros as the negation of sexual and racial differentiations produced under empire. Eros, installed at the heart of political struggle, would function as a source of guidance.

There are clear resonances between this use of the term ‘Erotic’ and the gay liberationists’ invocation of ‘Eros’ that was discussed in the previous section. Audre Lorde (1978b: 43), whilst less concerned with Freudian notions of a polymorphous and innate bisexuality, similarly conceives of the ‘Erotic’ as a quasi-mythic, spiritual force that is ‘vilified, abused, and devalued within western society.’ For Lorde, it is through the struggle against this suppression — that is, through the eroticization of everyday life — that the anti-imperialist politics of black feminism can be achieved. These writings on eroticism informed later black feminist texts. For example, in *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks dedicates an entire chapter to Eros. hooks retains a view of Eros as repressed, controlled, or denied within imperialist Western culture. Writes hooks:

Entering the classroom determined to erase the body and give ourselves over more fully to the mind, we show by our beings how deeply we have accepted the assumption that passion has no place in the classroom. Repression and denial make it possible for us to forget and then desperately seek to recover ourselves, our feelings, our passions in some private place — after class.

(hooks, 1994: 192)

For hooks, a legacy of the repression and denial of Eros is on display within the classroom. When love, eroticism, passion, and bodily presence are allowed to be present in sites of learning, the transformation of consciousness becomes possible. Within the classroom, Eros can function as ‘a motivating force’ — that is, it can ‘provide students with ways of knowing that enable them to know themselves better and live in the world more fully’ (ibid.: 194). In short, by counteracting a historical repression and denial of Eros, openings are created for the emergence of critical consciousness and liberated ways of being. To affirm passions, bodies, and eroticism is to practice freedom.

The black lesbian feminist writings on the suppression or denial of Eros as inseparable from the entrenchment of colonialism and empire risk romanticizing the pre-colonial past as a period of unqualified gender and sexual egalitarianism, thereby participating in a discourse that Rahul Rao

(2020: 45) terms ‘homoromanticism.’ Not only do these writings rest on an unconvincing view of pre-colonial societies, but, more fundamentally, they misconceive the convergence of pleasure and terror, enjoyment and dispossession, labor and leisure, that was so central in securing economies of slavery and colonial violence. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman (1997) illuminates this nexus of Eros and oppression. Without denying that pleasure could yield moments of resistance and rebellion, she shows that pleasure was folded into the strategies of racial subjugation and enslavement. Here, too, desire is not impervious to recuperation. Hartman (ibid.: 49) explains that pleasure ‘was ensnared in a web of domination, accumulation, abjection, resignation, and possibility.’

How did pleasure become inseparable from the conditions of captivity, subjection, and enslavement? First, Hartman (ibid.: 22) argues that representations of slave agency and pleasure were complicit in the intensification of the exploitation and dispossession of slaves as it confirmed ‘racist conceptions of Negro nature as carefree, infantile, hedonistic, and indifferent to suffering.’ Excessive innate capacities — a disposition to music, song, and dance, restricted sentience, natural cheerfulness, and abundant energy — were ascribed to slaves and became evidence of their suitedness to the condition of enslavement. The slave’s supposed endowment with such propensities for enjoyment and jollity had to be repeatedly simulated and recreated in order to demonstrate the slave’s satisfaction with her condition (ibid.: 23). This occurred through the pageantry of the coffle, the minstrel stage, the auction deck, and various other spectacles and festivities. Such displays of slave pleasure were not only instrumental to legitimizing the devastating circumstances of slave labor and to minimizing the violence of slavery, but also to enhancing the value of the slave. The simulated enjoyment of the slave functioned as an assurance to buyers in the slave trade (ibid.: 38). In *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai (2005: 95) examines how affects like animatedness and expressivity persist as markers of racialized difference in US culture: ‘[I]t is the cultural representation of the African-American that most visibly harnesses the affective qualities of liveliness, effusiveness, spontaneity, and zeal to a disturbing racial epistemology, and makes these variants of “animatedness” function as bodily (hence self-evident) signs of the raced subject’s naturalness or authenticity.’

Returning to the slave economy of the nineteenth century, the inseparability of pleasure and subjection did not only occur through the identification of the slave with pleasure, but also, of course, of the master. Hartman (1997: 21) notes: '[T]he fungibility of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values.' As property, the black slave is rendered a vehicle for the enjoyment of white slave owners, since the commodification of the slave's body permitted its use in whatever capacity the master desired. The entitlement and occupation of slave property was not unique to the slave master, however. The romantic racialism of slave abolitionists was also predicated on the wanton use of the slave's body. Hartman (*ibid.*: 19) argues that the empathetic identifications of slave abolitionists with the slaves, in an attempt to establish the shared nature and humanity of all men, revealed 'the very ease of possessing the abased and enslaved body.' The condemnation of the institutions of slavery, which relied on the routine spectacularization of black suffering, occurred through an exercise of imagination that positioned the white body in the place of the black body. This exercise, however, was not immune from the enjoyment derived from the possession of the black body, as it exploited the suffering of the slave as an opportunity for white self-exploration and for the self-congratulatory demonstration of opposition.

In short, the slave economy elided any clear distinction between pleasure and subjugation. It follows, Hartman (*ibid.*: 78) writes, that 'it is impossible to separate the use of pleasure as a technique of discipline from pleasure as a figuration of social transformation.' She continues: 'The claims made on behalf of pleasure are tenuous, provisional, and double-edged.' A reckoning with the ways that pleasure and enjoyment are inextricably bound to violence and exploitation complicates an understanding of white supremacy and colonial violence as advancing historically through the denial or repression of Eros to racialized populations. My argument is not that the enactments of Eros only exist in service to the capitalist state. Rather, it is to highlight the supplementarity of Eros and capital. I am therefore not seeking to preclude the possibility that a discovery and exploration of bodily and sexual pleasure can constitute forms of resistance, but rather to highlight that such practices, however surreptitious or militant, have also been seized upon by the dominant racial order. The black lesbian

feminists articulated a politics of pleasure that was successful in articulating an antagonism to the capitalist state, yet, as was the case with the gay liberationists, underestimated the possibilities for subsumption and recuperation.

### Eros against privatized citizenship: Neoliberalism and the AIDS activist movement

Both the gay liberation movement of the late sixties and the black lesbian feminist movement of the seventies were inspired by and aligned with Third World anti-colonial struggles the world over that were fighting for a post-capitalist, post-imperial, egalitarian restructuring of the global order. Most people who engaged in these liberation struggles invested immense hope in the promises that animated the struggles — most centrally, the promise to bring an end to exploitation, colonial violence, and the dispossession of their lands, resources, and livelihoods. By the late seventies, however, it had become clear to people both in the newly formed national liberation states and in the metropolises of former empires that national sovereignty and political independence alone would not fulfill the desires that the anti-colonial liberation struggles had carried with them. Post-colonial states settled instead for ‘fairer’ incorporation into global capitalism and opted overwhelmingly to pursue strategies of capitalist development. This new global order contained the liberatory demands of revolutionary movements. Whilst previously anti-imperialism was perhaps the most common ideological framework for uniting radical struggles against a common enemy, its capacity to name an antagonism that could signal a collective, global political project had diminished by the late seventies (Mohandesi, 2018). Whilst the social relations of imperialism remained intact, anti-imperialism almost disappeared entirely. As it became clear that national independence, political sovereignty, and economic development would not guarantee the transcendence of imperialist social relations, the dreams of decolonization were shattered amongst people in the former colonies and metropolises alike (Sharma, 2020: 18-19).

Traditional forms of political struggle, most notably labor unions and attempts to seize state power, appeared to radicals as ill-equipped to confront this restructuring of global capitalism. The highly dispersed and differentiated forces of resistance that surfaced in this period were primarily



oriented towards the defense of their livelihoods against the intensification of capital's ravaging ways (Harvey, 2005b: 189). They included struggles against resource extractivism, habitat destruction, privatization, and austerity measures, and frequently identified the international levers of finance capital (most notably the IMF and World Bank) as their primary antagonists (ibid.: 166-67). This neoliberal phase of capitalist development proved no less coercive than former periods. The United States has sought to crush any form of resistance with uncompromising brutality through the sponsoring of state terrorism, coup d'états, and associated forces (such as the Nicaraguan contras and the Afghani mujahedeen), as well as the imposition of embargoes and economic sanctions against states like Cuba and Iraq (ibid.: 38-39).

One resistance movement was represented by the AIDS activists of the late eighties and early nineties. In order to situate AIDS activism within the context of neoliberalism's reorganization of the world economy, it is necessary to understand that New York City in the eighties was the epicenter of the epidemic in the US *and* was emerging from its spectacular bankruptcy as the financial center of the new global system (Moody, 2007). How did this conjunction occur? The city defaulted on its debt in 1975, declaring technical bankruptcy. The financial institutions responsible for the ensuing bailout seized control over the city budget, centered the city's economy around financialization, and reasserted their class power. The neoliberal restructuring of New York City entailed drastic cuts to social spending (including education, health care, and transport infrastructures), the disciplining of municipal unions, the implementation of wage freezes, and the diversification of consumerism through gentrification and a rebranding of the city as a cosmopolitan cultural center (Harvey, 2005a: 45-47). Real estate development transformed the city. The redevelopment of industrial manufacturing and warehousing spaces into underpopulated luxury condominiums and apartments displaced working-class communities (Carroll, 2015: 131). This process has been described by Harvey (2005a: 45) as 'a coup by the financial institutions against the democratically elected government of New York City,' which 'was every bit as effective as the military coup that had earlier occurred in Chile.' Numerous scholars have described the management of New York City's fiscal crisis as a blueprint for both the neoliberal reorganization of domestic policies under the Reagan administration and the

structural adjustment programs imposed internationally in the decades to follow (see Harvey, 2005a: 48; Cooper, 2017: 191; Moody, 2007: 18).

The conditions for the unfolding of an epidemic could not have been more favorable.<sup>17</sup> Upscale development projects and reductions in social service provision hurled racialized and queer working-class New Yorkers to the margins of society, where they were immediately struck by the crack and AIDS epidemics, leaving entire communities vulnerable to impoverishment, criminalization, homelessness, and death. AIDS was first identified in the United States in 1981, one year after the presidential election of Ronald Reagan. Upon taking office, Reagan swiftly devolved responsibility for cuts to social service provision to state and municipal levels of governments (Cooper, 2017: 189). The private sector was to implement market-based solutions to social problems, and churches and families were ‘to restore a conservative Christian-based morality to the nation’ (Carroll, 2015: 132). New York City was one of the first cities to implement an austerity regime and enact drastic restrictions to welfare and social insurance programs such as Medicaid (Cooper, 2017: 189). Indeed, health care became a prime target of budget cutbacks throughout the eighties as the rates of infection surged — with the city closing around 1,800 inpatient hospital beds between late 1986 and early 1987 alone, and President George H. W. Bush proposing further spending reductions to hospitals as late as 1989 (ibid.: 190-91). But institutional inertia was not the only threat to vulnerable communities. The hardening of immigration controls manifested in part through a travel ban that was imposed on HIV-positive migrants in 1987 and led to the detention of nearly 300 Haitian refugees at Guantánamo Bay in the early nineties (Chávez, 2012), while practices of privatization within the city ravaged existing queer lifeworlds. Kevin Floyd asks:

Might we [...] understand the contemporary dispersal of queer formations by the neoliberal state, with its effect for instance of making Christopher Street less queer, as itself a form of

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<sup>17</sup> While here I focus mainly on the AIDS crisis in New York City, it should be noted that scholarship has also demonstrated how the adoption of neoliberal economic policies has worsened the trajectory of the AIDS pandemic in states like South Africa by perpetuating the racialized contours of sexual relations that were entrenched by colonialism and apartheid (Hunter, 2007).

accumulation by dispossession, as part of this long history of expropriation definitive of capital itself, a history of violence that has always supplemented ‘hegemony through consent’? Real estate speculation, through the buying up of devalued assets like the land that was formerly the site of the Christopher Street piers, for example — investment that hopes to generate demand for new condominiums and apartments, provided the police are out in sufficient force to defend the investment — begins here to look like a variation on the ongoing speculative raiding of the commons.

(Floyd, 2009: 207-08)

Land in the United States is nowhere more valuable than in Manhattan, making real estate development a highly profitable venture during periods of economic growth (Moody, 2007: 27-28). Over the eighties and nineties, such real estate speculation (stimulated through tax abatements for commercial developers) eviscerated sites of vibrant, visible, and publicly accessible queer social life, including Times Square and Christopher Street, that were sustained by local porn businesses, bars, clubs, bathhouses, and other meeting places. The local infrastructure in these areas, often established through commercialized venues for public sex, had facilitated the emergence and preservation of queer forms of collectivity throughout the seventies. Most of them were closed down through ‘neighborhood restoration’ (that is, zoning ordinances and real estate development) as these spaces were transformed into family-friendly tourist havens, entertainment and retail complexes, and high-end developments like Trump Tower (Floyd, 2009: 202-03; Carroll, 2015: 132). These closures achieved an increasing privatization of sexuality and citizenship, reinforcing neoliberalism’s atomizing logics of property and abetting neoliberalism’s liquidation of collectivity. This rezoning and gentrification of urban space was executed on behalf of the innocent and sanctified child, seen as in need of protection from racialized and queer proletarian populations to whom moral depravity and perversities were attributed that threatened to undermine the ‘proper’ relations of the private home.

Martin Manalansan (2005) has studied this spatial dispersal of queer of color life in New York City. In an ethnography of the queer neighborhoods Jackson Heights in Queens and Christopher

Street in Manhattan, Manalansan (ibid.: 141) shows how neoliberal urban governance has ‘redrawn boundaries, neighborhoods, and lives and given rise to insidious forms of surveillance of and violence in communities of color.’ A central narrative about the reorganization of these urban spaces that arises from her conversations with queer people of color is the decimation of cruising spaces and commercial sites of public sex under Mayor Giuliani’s crackdown on so-called ‘quality of life’ crimes (ibid.: 146). Manalansan also relays the loss of their sense of safety and ownership over the area around the Christopher Street piers, where young queer and trans people of color used to conduct voguing competitions and runway shows throughout the seventies and early eighties. This space has since been transformed into a stylized waterside park that runs along the Hudson River and is lined with glass and steel condominiums and apartment buildings (ibid.: 149). Her research concludes that ‘[t]he rise of a vibrant exclusive real estate, gay commodified businesses, and other signs of the new gentrified New York are based on the very process of eradication and disappearance of the unsightly, the vagrant, the alien, the colored, and the queer’ (ibid.: 152).

The subsumption of desire and pleasure was, once again, integral to the consolidation of this neoliberal model of social organization. According to Sara Ahmed (2010), the private family and its various sentimentalized associations (of monogamy, marriage, and procreation) are rendered universal objects of human desire through the promise of happiness. Ahmed (ibid.: 7) explains the ‘happiness duty,’ a moral order which imposes a constant injunction to be happy, as an orientation device: a way of directing individuals along the ‘right’ path, of promoting certain social norms and forms of personhood, of making particular institutions appear as affording purpose, meaning, and direction. ‘Happy objects’ are objects which individuals are socialized to desire, objects which promise to give order to lives (ibid.: 21). One such ‘happy object’ is the private family. It provides an image of ‘the good life.’ This image, Ahmed (ibid.: 90) notes, cannot be separated ‘from the historic privileging of heterosexual conduct, as expressed in romantic love and coupledness, as well as in the idealization of domestic privacy.’ Ahmed (ibid.: 39) thus conceives of happiness as imposing conditions: it regulates and disciplines our desires by promising happiness ‘in return for desiring well.’ This vertical organization of desire transforms the private family from a neutral social institution into a social good.

The insidious neoliberal imperative to be happy is therefore centrally bound to the naturalization of the private family and the gendered, sexualized, and racialized exclusions it reinforces. Lisa Duggan (2009: 276) has written about ‘desirable’ affects such as happiness and optimism in an analogous way: ‘They can operate as the affective reward for conformity, the privatized emotional bonus for the right kind of investments in the family, private property and the state.’ For her, the happiness duty coheres through ‘race and class privilege,’ ‘imperial hubris,’ ‘gender and sexual conventions,’ and ‘maldistributed forms of security.’ In short, it produces vertical relations of desire that secure existing social relations.

Chapter Three argued that the AIDS activists envisioned public, non-familial sex as a negation of the neoliberal privatization of sexuality. They adapted the gay liberationist view of Eros in a time when it was not homosexuality that was criminalized, but rather certain forms of non-privatized sexual practices. Accordingly, Eros was conceived no longer as a sexual essence (Mieli’s ‘transsexuality’ or Altman’s ‘bisexuality’), but rather as the defense of certain practices of erotic freedom that took place within the commercial sex venues and public cruising spaces that faced closure and redevelopment. The eroticization of safer sex and the destigmatization of non-normative sex acts represented, for the radical AIDS activists, both a defense of those public sexual cultures endangered by the neoliberal privatization of citizenship and a prefiguration of egalitarian social systems where distinctions between social class, race, nationality, gender, and sexuality would dissolve in the generalized quest to discover, experiment with, and cultivate new forms of love, sexual pleasure, promiscuity, and sociality. The eroticization of everyday life became, again, the horizon of queer worldmaking, designating a shared, democratic future beyond the confinement of the bourgeois private home. The political radicality of the AIDS activists was attached to their promotion and celebration of non-normative, non-familial, and public sexual practices.

The equation of pleasure and resistance impels us to ask anew: Does the pursuit of pleasure necessarily bring transformation, resistance, and freedom? Or did the AIDS activists also unwittingly reinforce vertical relations of desire that secured the illusory universality of privatized citizenship? Certainly the politics of those high-profile AIDS activists who rejected sexual promiscuity and extolled

the virtues of privacy and domesticity was entrapped in relations of cruel optimism, confirming the normative fantasies of the private family even as it is unable to deliver on the promises and affective attachments with which it is invested. But even within the politics of the more radical AIDS activists, we find a romanticized view of queer zones that elided the insidious ways that the subcultural expressions of communal, non-normative sexual practices inevitably produce the normalization of new codes of conduct and disavow existing hierarchies within those communal zones. Leo Bersani lays bare:

Anyone who has ever spent one night in a gay bathhouse knows that it is (or was) one of the most ruthlessly ranked, hierarchized, and competitive environments imaginable. Your looks, muscles, hair distribution, size of cock, and shape of ass determined exactly how happy you were going to be during those few hours, and rejection, generally accompanied by two or three words at most, could be swift and brutal, with none of the civilizing hypocrisies with which we get rid of undesirables in the outside world.

(Bersani, 1987: 206)

Far from a site of utopian, radical democratic, and egalitarian belonging, Bersani depicts commercial venues for queer sex as containing (and even exacerbating) the differentiations, hierarchies, and exclusions of wider society. How, then, should these sites become the starting point for radical politics? As Bersani (*ibid.*) insists, ‘the ways in which *having sex* politicizes are highly problematical.’ Right-wing politics, he reminds his readers, also relies upon particular sexual and homoerotic imaginations. Think, for instance, of the widespread sentimentalization of military soldiers or other patriotic blue-collar workers.

Networks of pleasure and power were not straight-forwardly oppositional, and non-normative practices of sexuality had to be understood as enmeshed in or recuperated by capitalist social relations. In fact, Bersani (1995: 87) suggests the possibility that underground sexual cultures sustained socially sanctioned spheres of bourgeois life: ‘The transformation of the brutal, all-powerful corporate executive (by day) into the whimpering, panty-clad servant of a pitiless dominatrix (by night) is

nothing more than a comparatively invigorating release of tension.’ Bersani prompts the consideration that the practice of ‘subversive’ sexual practices can actually fortify existing hierarchies by allowing participants to carve out covert spaces in which they are granted fleeting experiences of freedom and autonomy, in which social positions are inverted or transgressed, while the status quo remains intact. Today, images of cocaine-fueled hedonism and unrestrained ‘sexploits’ are as likely to be found within popular representations of Wall Street culture as they are to be identified with non-normative, subcultural practices.

Lauren Berlant (2010: 26), in their essay ‘Risky Bigness,’ is similarly concerned with the ways in which the pleasures associated with sex (alongside overeating, drinking, smoking, and shopping) can provide ‘a kind of rest for the exhausted self, an interruption of being good, conscious, and intentional that feels like a relief.’ Under neoliberalism, in the face of overwhelming exhaustion produced by the difficulties of reproducing one’s life and maintaining a sustainable sense of well-being, it is ordinary pleasures that ‘provide opportunities to become absorbed in the present’ and ‘make it possible to get up tomorrow and do it all over again’ (ibid.: 27). Pleasure, then, operates as a veritable safety valve, offering individuals a moment of relief, agency, and optimism. This essay confirms (sexual) pleasure’s subsumption within the neoliberal social order. It is yet another illustration of the ways that specific pleasures can secure existing social relations when separated from a politics of broader transformation.

Not only were queer lifeworlds far from the utopian, non-hierarchical, and egalitarian spaces they were often envisioned as, but the pleasures that they generated and cultivated were not inherently revolutionary. Such a presupposition imagines queer zones as independent from or subversive of the privatized spheres of neoliberalism, where the cultivation of pleasures is assumed to be stifled or precluded entirely. On the contrary, quests for pleasure were often complicit in the stabilization of those very hierarchies and exclusions that undermined public and accessible spaces of queer sociality. The radical AIDS activists were not wrong to believe that specific forms of pleasure could gesture towards the dissolution of social hierarchies and repressive institutions. However, like the queer activists that preceded them, they misjudged the capacity for their recuperation. The unruliness of Eros meant that it would not function as a mere instrument for the advancement of radical politics.

## Conclusion

The preceding chapters provided a transnational renarrativization of queer social movements that divulged the transnational travels, connections, and outlooks that have been elided within their traditional domestic histories yet were so integral to their formation and development. These transnational accounts of the histories of radical sexual politics in the age of United States hegemony, this chapter revealed, enables a clarification of the relation that queerness, sexual politics, and pleasure bear to the modern capitalist state. I argued that radical political struggles around sexuality can be distinguished by their pursuit of Eros both as a strategy to articulate the repression, violence, and exploitation to which they have been subjected, and as a basis for a politics of transformation and liberation. Queer worldmaking practices attend to queerness not only as a condition of pathologization, stigmatization, and subordination attached to individuals who display gender and sexual deviance, but also as a site of pleasure, eroticism, and sociality. They therefore threaten to undo the gendered and sexualized stratifications which the nation-state conceals and upon which capital depends.

Not all radical sexual political formations have treated Eros in the affirmative manner of the gay liberationists, black lesbian feminists, and AIDS activists. Political lesbianism, which has received relatively little attention in this thesis, is one notable case. If the queer worldmaking practices explored here fought for freedom by seeking to *unleash* desires and pleasures through political will, political lesbians fought for freedom by seeking to *repress* or otherwise bend and govern their sexual desires for men through political will. Although these two strategies seem to be antithetical, they both rested on a conviction that desire and politics aligned through the struggle for sexual liberation. Desire proved uncompromising, however. As this chapter has argued, pleasure and power, sexuality and subjugation, desire and domination, were not simple oppositions. On the contrary, pleasure, sexuality, and desire have historically been inescapably ensnared with power, subjugation, and domination. The ungovernable nature of desire means that, whilst it can animate radical struggles against the social



order, it cannot guarantee success. This chapter examined the conditions under which the recuperation of desire occurs. My argument is that transnational projects of queer worldmaking articulated emancipatory, horizontal relations of desire by treating Eros as a proxy for the fundamental transformation of social relations. When severed from their broader political horizon, however, those specific demands for pleasure could be deftly recuperated and harnessed for the stabilization of prevailing social relations.

## **Conclusion. Radical sexual politics in the age of hegemonic decline**

The reproduction of the American hegemonic order has historically been dependent on an organization of gender and sexual relations that subordinated queer formations through means of criminalization, pathologization, police brutality, extralegal violence, and super-exploitation within the most low-wage and informal sectors of the labor market. This subordination was legitimized through the association of queerness with an array of perversities, pathologies, and unsanctioned desires that violate the proper relations of bourgeois civil society. Queerness has been linked to a dizzying number of ‘social ills’ including sex work, pedophilia, incest, pornography, drugs, idleness, hedonism, madness, and disease. As such, queerness has served as a designation for a spectral and corrosive threat to moral order, to public health and security, to labor discipline, to privacy, and to proprietorial conceptions of the self — that is, to the fabric of capitalist society.

Projects of queer worldmaking throughout this period were united in their conviction that the pursuit of Eros could create openings for the supersession of the existing global order and the instantiation of egalitarian systems through which we can collectively and cooperatively determine the ways our gender and sexual lives are produced and reproduced. This thesis is therefore about queer worldmaking in its most literal sense: it finds a connection between *queer* political formations and the US-led *world* system. That connection dictated both the spatial and temporal frame of this study. Queer worldmaking projects, I argued, responded to the successive regimes of accumulation that determined the organization and expansion of the American world system since the end of the Second World War. They formed extensive organizational structures, solidarity networks, and critical knowledges that traveled across the boundaries of nation, state, and territory. They were not intended primarily, or often even at all, as parodic citations of dominant gender norms within the public sphere, but rather as antagonistic practices that could transform and transcend the social relations of United

States hegemony. It is in this sense that the American hegemonic order provided the conditions for the formation of revolutionary queer social movements.

Within these movements, queerness was articulated not only as a product of subordination and repression, but also as the site of enjoyment, pleasure, sociality, and camp; not only as a condition of subjection, but also as a prefiguration that impresses upon us the necessity of reconstituting global social relations. The contribution of queer worldmaking to the broader history of the revolutionary Left has been to place bodily autonomy, egalitarian relations of kinship and care, and sexual fulfillment at the heart of struggles for freedom. As with the feminist, anti-racist, and socialist movements of the twentieth century, the strategies and demands of radical queer struggles have been susceptible to co-optation and recuperation by the capitalist state, especially when disconnected from their wider project of total transformation. However, this does not mean that these struggles were doomed to fail. Rather, it compels us to probe the mechanisms through which pleasure and desire are subsumed by capitalist social relations in order to reinforce global systems of violence, dispossession, and exploitation.

### Sexual differentiations of the war on terror

In the early 2000s, a debate about the decline of American hegemony re-emerged in International Relations scholarship. Following the September 11 attacks in 2001, and intensifying after the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, scholars from various IR traditions (most notably neorealism, hegemonic stability theory, and neoliberal institutionalism) perceived United States hegemony — variously referred to as American primacy, pre-eminence, and unipolarity — to be on the wane. They argued that it would be increasingly difficult for the United States to maintain its role as the dominant power on the world stage due to geopolitical challenges from new ‘great powers’ like China and India (Pape, 2005; Layne, 2006; Khanna, 2008; Kirshner, 2008; Mahbubani, 2008; Zakaria, 2008; Kupchan, 2012). If hegemony is achieved primarily through the consolidation of power through consent and cooperation, and only secondarily through coercion, then the new millennium marked a notable break

with the strategy of rule that the United States had exercised in the preceding half-century. As David Harvey (2005b: 75) foresaw early on: ‘The Bush administration’s shift towards unilateralism, towards coercion rather than consent, towards a much more overtly imperial vision, and towards reliance upon its unchallengeable military power, indicates a high-risk approach to sustaining US domination.’ The US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan signaled the inauguration of a long-term strategic doctrine of military expansion and war. This display of direct coercion and military dominance revived the term ‘empire’ as a designation of America’s role on the world stage — not only among critics of American interventions, but also in popular discussion and on the neoconservative right (Agnew, 2005). Observing this open acceptance and indeed advocacy of empire and imperialism in the aftermath of 9/11, Michael Cox (2003: 7) wrote: ‘Now, [the United States] appeared to have arrogated to itself the right to set standards, determine threats, use force, and mete out justice to those whom it deemed unworthy.’

The September 11 attacks occurred at a period when, at home, ‘elements in the middle classes took to the defence of territory, nation, and tradition as a way to arm themselves against a predatory neoliberal capitalism,’ and nation-states in the global South began to assert themselves as major players within the international system and global economy (Harvey, 2005b: 188). 9/11 therefore ‘provided the golden opportunity [...] to construct an American nationalism that could provide the basis for a different form of imperialist endeavor and internal control,’ one which would come to be known as the war on terror (ibid.: 193). In her landmark text *Terrorist Assemblages*, Jasbir Puar (2017) interrogates the novel forms of gendered, sexualized, and racialized hierarchization that were produced within the context of the global war on terror. Puar (ibid: 2) writes that ‘the propagation of the United States as empire’ sanctioned the construction of a new national subjectivity: the patriot.

The previous chapter argued that the capitalist state is maintained through an illusory universality — stipulating equality, liberty, and security whilst innovating processes of exploitation, violence, and dispossession. In order to negotiate the contradictions between this abstract equality and concrete hierarchization, it has universalized national subjectivities to disavow the racialized, gendered, and sexualized differences that are central to the reproduction of capitalist society. It has been detailed

how the figures of the citizen, consumer, and child mediated the contradictions between US state and capital at its various stages of historical development. How does the figure of the American patriot manage the constitutive contradictions of US state and capital in the twenty-first century? And what disavowed differentiations were the precondition for its universality? Puar (ibid.: 8-9) highlights how the American exceptionalism of the twenty-first century generates a novel set of contradictions, captured by the dual meaning of 'American exceptionalism.' On the one hand, the US is exceptional in the sense that it frames itself as superior to the instability and immoral violence of former empires. It is uniquely positioned to protect and maintain the status quo. On the other hand, the US is exceptional in the sense that it exempts itself from the moral standards, human rights, and democratic norms it itself mandates. There is a contradiction here: the US appoints itself as at once the arbiter of a *universal* normative order and as *singularly* responsible for preserving that way of life. It exempts itself from its own 'universalizing mandates' (ibid.: 8). This contradiction — of both mandating universal human rights and arrogating to itself the sole prerogative to violate human rights — is resolved through 'the normalizing impulses of patriotism after September 11, 2001' (ibid.: xxxii-xxxiii). The figure of the patriot, the hegemonic national ideal of the war on terror, is central to what Puar (ibid.: 9) refers to as 'the biopolitical valorization of life.' Subjecthood that constitutes itself in alignment with the interests of US empire is valorized, whilst populations of racialized and perversely sexualized others are subjected to detention, deportation, and death. The biopolitical mandate of the war on terror is to foster the life of new national subjects, sanctioned under the rubric of the American patriot, and simultaneously disqualify racialized others from national belonging.

Puar, alongside many critical security scholars, has explained the global war on terror as an organizing force of twenty-first-century US empire. Vivienne Jabri (2006: 51) has underscored the fact that the invasion and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, the establishment of camps such as Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, the use of torture against prisoners, increasing deportations and border restrictions, and targeted killing were all measures that were undertaken as elements of the war on

terror.<sup>18</sup> These processes seek to protect and promote the well-being of the national population, consigning to death those racialized and non-normatively sexualized populations who are constructed as threatening to the survival of the nation (ibid.: 52; Debrix, 2008: 104-11). The construction of the figure of the American patriot recognized and sanctioned communities that had formerly been excluded from such national ideals — most notably, white, bourgeois homosexual citizens. The focus of Puar's (2017: xx) analysis is how the war on terror's 'biopolitical management of life' reconfigured the parameters of national belonging through the valorization of certain forms of homosexual life and the concomitant 'ever-narrowing parameters of white racial privilege, consumption capabilities, gender and kinship normativity, and bodily integrity.' Puar coins the term 'homonationalism' to refer to the ties between the recognition of some (white, middle-class) homosexual subjects and the entrenchment of violent state structures under twenty-first-century US empire. Her argument is that the legal and representational incorporation of certain homosexual subjects, their positioning as American patriots, was predicated upon the disavowal of racialized and non-normatively sexualized populations, embodied by the figure of the male Muslim terrorist. Homonationalism therefore names 'a structuring force of neoliberal subject formation' (ibid.: 230):

[H]omonationalism is the concomitant rise in the legal, consumer, and representative recognition of LGBTQ subjects and the curtailing of welfare provisions, immigrant rights, and the expansion of state power to surveil, detain, and deport. This process relies on the shoring up of the respectability of homosexual subjects in relation to the performative reiteration of the pathologized perverse (homo- and hetero-)sexuality of racial others, in specific, Muslim others upon whom Orientalist and neo-Orientalist projections are cast.

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<sup>18</sup> Targeted killing was the cornerstone of the Obama administration's counterinsurgency policy, the most notable element of which was an extensive drone program. Obama significantly expanded the drone program he inherited from the Bush administration, conducting over 563 drone strikes compared to the 57 strikes during his predecessor's time in office (Serle and Purkiss, 2017). Targeted killing was deployed by the United States government across the Middle East and Northern Africa, mainly in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, Libya, and Somalia (Grayson, 2016: 1). The legitimization of this form of political violence as a form of 'humanitarian warfare' threatened to render war ubiquitous, its leaders unaccountable, and its violence invisible (Zehfuss, 2010; Zehfuss, 2012).

In sum, the contradictions of US empire were managed through the segregation and exclusion of racialized and non-normatively sexualized populations deemed necessary for the protection of the valorized life of the American patriot. The emergence of the patriot as the dominant national subjectivity was, like the universalized figures of citizen, consumer, and child before it, imbricated within global relations of dispossession, violence, and accumulation.

### Imperial crisis

Since its formation in the nineteenth century, the bourgeois domestic sphere has contained numerous contradictions that threaten to undermine its own existence. It professes universality whilst continually mutating and restructuring itself. It hails itself as a refuge from the state and market whilst instilling the norms of productivity, discipline, self-reliance, and servility required of working populations. It promises a site of leisure and free development of individuality whilst commodifying leisure and reinforcing social integration. It legitimates itself as the foundation of civil society whilst claiming to protect its members from the vices and sins of that same civil society. It is premised on the mutual exchange of love and care whilst orchestrating countless instances of violence and coercion to maintain its unity and cohesion. It proclaims to be the most natural organization of private life whilst depending on global political, economic, and affective structures to maintain itself. The management of these contradictory elements, this thesis has shown, has historically been central to the disavowal of the fundamental contradiction between US state and capital — that is, between capital's limitless quest for accumulation and the boundaries erected by the modern state-system.

Throughout the period of American hegemony, the bourgeois domestic sphere was able to reproduce itself in creative ways despite its self-undermining tendencies. During the Fordist period of the fifties and sixties, the heteronormative nuclear family model was supported by the family wage, welfare provisions, tax reductions, and widely accessible mortgages. These forms of state support were

eroded over the following decades as the family was privatized as an alternative to state welfare. Although this accelerated the self-undermining elements of the bourgeois family, evident in rising rates of divorce, delayed marriage, single life, and informal partnership, the family was able to reproduce itself under neoliberalism through strong affective attachments to its normative fantasies. Even as it was increasingly unable to secure for its members an abiding sense of well-being and security, a continued investment in the promises of private nuclearity guaranteed its preservation. More than a decade since Lauren Berlant described this affective structure, it is unclear whether the present can still be described as characterized by such relations of cruel optimism. The comforts provided by consumerism, free time, and fantasies of the good life no longer convincingly conceal the longer-term degradation of dignified human existence. The legalization of same-sex marriage in 2015, alongside other instances of the biopolitical valorization of homosexual life during the war on terror, appears within this context of terminal crisis as a final attempt to shore up the legitimacy of the moribund family form. In our age of US imperial decline, the self-undermining tendencies of bourgeois domesticity, like that of the wider social order, appear to have exceeded its capacity to reproduce itself.

Many theorists, including Christopher Chitty, have returned to Antonio Gramsci to explain this conjuncture. Paraphrasing Gramsci's often-cited quote about the 'interregnum,' Chitty (2020: 189) writes that 'a stable family form [is] undermined in this dissolution of the normal, and yet no new sexual order can be born.' Studies from the United States demonstrate an array of morbid symptoms: birth rates are declining (Population Reference Bureau, 2021), fewer people are deciding to get married (Weeks, 2021), open and polyamorous forms of coupling are proliferating (Klein, 2021), young adults are having less sex than previous generations (Ueda et al., 2020), and cases of domestic violence are on the rise (Piquero et al., 2021). Young people assert a growing uncertainty about whether the nuclear family is a model that will ever be affordable, accessible, or practical, let alone that can deliver on all that it promises, and whether ecological destruction will make dignified life unviable in the near future anyway. Under conditions of widespread precarity and in the rubble of compounding global crises, the contradictions of the family have become heightened. The global Covid-19 pandemic was one such instance, straining the already fragile institution of the private home. For many bourgeois,



predominantly white nuclear family members who were forced to remain in their homes, the pandemic demystified and even reversed the governing fictions that sanitize the domestic sphere as a space of shelter, romance, and leisure rather than of confinement, physical and psychological vulnerability, unequal distribution of housework and parenting, and rent and debt.

Capitalism repeatedly suspends its own foundations. In moments of crisis, this transgression of its own barriers results in its failure to materially and socially reproduce itself. Such was the case with the family form during the imperial crisis of the seventies. As the previous chapter argued, the neoliberal privatization of the family was precipitated by imperial overreach. This period of crisis saw a radical reversal in power between the Western imperial bloc and countless Third World states that had recently achieved national sovereignty. While the United States was suffering a humiliating military defeat in Vietnam, Third World countries were simultaneously witnessing their strategic position in the global economy suddenly shift from one of relative weakness and penetrability to considerable leverage over markets, as Fordist consumption norms within advanced economies increased the need for primary resources from the global South. OPEC's decision to proclaim an oil embargo against Israel's allied states in the Yom Kippur War then provoked an energy crisis. The ensuing oil price surge, amid spiraling unemployment and stagnant growth, triggered a set of reactions that launched the US into a fiscal crisis. The preceding chapter argued that the contradictions of this crisis were displaced onto non-heteronormative racial formations: primarily, black 'welfare queens.' The crisis of the family today occurs again within the context of imperial crisis (Barkawi, 2022). The Salvage Collective has drawn the parallel between 1973 and the present conjuncture as follows:

It is too rarely stressed that the partial social revolution that changed our lives, 'neoliberalism,' was precipitated by a crisis for the previous order *at the level of imperialism*. [...] Today, the loss of Russian energy supplies threatens to destabilise rocky economies emerging from a pandemic and facing long-run trends of stagnant productivity and living standards while stalking inflation returns from the history books. The picture looks much like 1973, the last cusp of coming transformation. Once again, threatened destabilisation emerges in the shadow of war

[...]. When railway workers in London go on strike, the Daily Telegraph suggests they are in league with Putin. It is an eerily old-fashioned charge, waved at the factory militants of '70s Britain. In a crisis, enemies of stability and Our Way of Life are to be found across oceans and under the bed. Truly the domestic and the global, the political and the industrial and the economic, are all visibly interlocked. [...] The oil crisis was an occasion to clamp down on a world order where imperial powers could be made so nervous: the succeeding, neoliberal world order included not just Western privatisations but also Southern coups and an international policy and legal architecture for protecting 'free trade' and corporate power from the sovereign power of the once-colonised. A grand shift in the organisation of capitalism followed from a polysemic crisis ('polycrisis', is Adam Tooze's helpful frame now), where geopolitical and economic control were co-dependent and co-threatened. Then, American imperialism seized on the crisis and resolved it in the interests of global wealth and power, and American wealth and power. What will be the outcome now? With its geopolitical balance of power open amid economic crisis and cultural fissures, this moment resembles in many ways the global transition to neoliberalism.

(Salvage Editorial Collective, 2022: 15-16)

The language of transition above implies a teleology, precluding a consideration that the morbid symptoms of the present might not be an interregnum that will yield to a new order but rather that they *are* the new order.

This thesis has shown that sexual formations within civil society play a key role in the reproduction of the hegemonic order — from the organization of production to the inter-state system. The present crisis within the imperial core has correspondingly intensified the constitutive contradictions of the privatized household. These contradictions are currently being displaced primarily onto trans people. Transphobic violence is on the rise globally, and far-right nationalist movements have organized their platforms around an opposition to 'gender ideology.' These transnational movements concur, Judith Butler (2021) has recently written in the pages of *The*

*Guardian*, ‘that the traditional family is under attack, that children in the classroom are being indoctrinated to become homosexuals, and that “gender” is a dangerous, if not diabolical, ideology threatening to destroy families, local cultures, civilization, and even “man” himself.’ In Butler’s assessment, gender for these authoritarian formations ‘attracts, condenses, and electrifies a diverse set of social and economic anxieties produced by increasing economic precarity under neoliberal regimes, intensifying social inequality, and pandemic shutdown.’ In order to defend the sanctity and naturalness of heteronormativity, whiteness, and the nation, they must insist that those non-normative populations who are excluded from the ‘traditional’ bourgeois family (especially trans and queer people fleeing their biogenetic families and racialized migrants who have been separated from their families) are to blame for the polysemic crisis of the present. The ensuing gender panics have functioned as an expedient mechanism to retrench heteronormative sexual formations, revoke reproductive rights, criminalize and pathologize queer and trans youth, and sanction extralegal forms of queerphobic violence. In short, the renaturalization of the bourgeois domestic sphere in our times of imperial crisis proceeds once again via the displacement of its contradictions onto racialized, non-normatively gendered and sexualized surplus populations.

### Eros at the end of empire: The transfeminist politics of pleasure

The black lesbian feminists of the seventies refused to acquiesce to the retrenchment of the heteronormative family form. Instead, their position of structural subordination enabled them to resignify their estrangement from heteronormative sexual formations as a critical standpoint from where to develop liberatory visions of kinship, care, and erotic freedom. This thesis showed that black radicals like Angela Davis and Francis Beal understood the social function of the seventies myth of black matriarchy, which turned the black woman into the figure of social disintegration and crisis, to be depoliticizing. They accused those black nationalists who adopted the myth of black matriarchy and sought to impose the prescriptions of heteronormativity onto black family formations of assuming a counter-revolutionary position. Confronted with this attempt to narrow black women’s standing

within the black power movement, they invoked the historical role of black women in the development of revolutionary consciousness and insurrectionary movements within slave communities.

Today, the representation of trans people as figures of social disorganization authorizes virulent attacks on their lives and seeks, to borrow Angela Davis's formulation, to drive them 'back into the shadows.' Radical transfeminist writers, such as Kay Gabriel, Jules Gleeson, M. E. O'Brien, Sophie Lewis, and Jordy Rosenberg, similarly to the black feminists of the seventies, have identified trans life not simply as conditioned by subjection and pathologization, but also as a site for the realization of bodily autonomy, pleasure, and affirmation. In doing so, these writers have consciously recalled the central role played by trans and gender-nonconforming people within the history of radical sexual politics and have carried forward the history of revolutionary queer writing on Eros that has been the subject of this thesis. Protagonists encountered in previous chapters, such as the gay liberationist Mario Mieli, the black feminist Claudia Jones, and the AIDS activist Douglas Crimp, feature prominently in contemporary transfeminist texts. Many such texts have appeared in a series of recently established journals and magazines dedicated to leftist analyses of sexuality, gender, and the family, such as *Pinko*, *Invert*, *Mal*, *Parapraxis*, and *Homintern*, and others have been published as books (see Gleeson and O'Rourke, 2021; Abdelhadi and O'Brien, 2022; O'Brien, 2023).

The work of Mario Mieli, first translated into English in 2018 under the title 'Towards a Gay Communism,' has been a rich source of inspiration for trans writers in recent years. In her essay 'Gender as Accumulation Strategy,' the poet and activist Kay Gabriel (2020) seeks to renew Mieli's attention to the liberatory potential that is borne in the exercise of unrestrained eroticism, hedonistic desire, and public promiscuity. She argues that Mieli's writing envisages a transformation of gender from a strategy of capital accumulation to a dimension of 'disalienated pleasure.' Gabriel is not oblivious to the recuperations of the gay liberationist conception of Eros that were discussed in the previous chapter. She acknowledges: 'The main form of appearance of pleasure in a consumer society dominated by the tyranny of the commodity-form is the promise of satisfaction that capital parasitises in order to circulate goods and realise profit. In that regard, the relationship of pleasure to class struggle is at best obscure.' However, Gabriel also refuses to cede pleasure as a terrain of political struggle. The

question for her is, rather, how to articulate our embodied needs — for shelter, food, rest, sex, health, community, and aesthetic experience — as coordinates within a broader vision of social transformation, even as their fulfillment appears as a dwindling possibility:

Where the crises of the present — let's name them: capitalogenic climate change, nationalisms fascistic or conservative, the growth of surplus population worldwide and a concomitant crisis of social reproduction — seem to foreshorten the future, and to force us to settle for something 'less than a nightmare,' our first strength is our ability to conceive of demands equal to our ambition. Their common object must be nothing other than a life worth living for everyone.

(Gabriel, 2020)

Kay Gabriel is not the only writer to have inherited Mieli's designation of disalienated pleasure as the horizon of utopian politics. In her work on intersex liberation, Jules Gleeson (2020) has repurposed Mieli's controversial inversion of Freud, which valorized the putative innate transsexuality of the child and characterized the process of becoming an adult heterosexual as one of disfigurement and loss. For Gleeson, Mieli's thesis provides a useful heuristic to understand how hermaphroditism (like 'transsexuality' for Mieli) becomes an unwelcome reminder of the mutability and flexibility of human forms, how hermaphrodites are mutilated as children to affirm rigid taxonomies, and how interphobia and transphobia stem accordingly from 'an over-arching fear of hermaphroditic flesh.' The denial of hermaphroditism is a social process of *self*-denial. Society purges the hermaphrodite to naturalize heterosexuality and binary sexual classifications. Intersex liberation, according to Gleeson, therefore means a liberated hermaphroditism: the celebration of the indeterminacy of sex.

In another essay from the pages of *Pinko* entitled 'Finding Pleasure in Care,' Edna Bonhomme (2020) cites members of the transnational black feminist movement. She writes: 'Black feminist theory provides the cartography for healing since it is grounded on practice that creates constructing archives, sustaining caring alliances, and exercising the erotic.' This piece excavates the centrality of pleasure and

joy in the black feminist politics of self-preservation. The writings of the black feminist movement have also been at the center of a resurgent interest in the politics of family abolition (see King, 2018; Lewis, 2022; O'Brien, 2023). One prominent proponent of family abolition, the writer Sophie Lewis (2020), began to write extensively about the erotic within the context of the coronavirus pandemic. The parallels between the pandemic and the AIDS epidemic were not lost on Lewis. They write:

In 1987, Douglas Crimp published 'How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic,' the epidemic in question being, of course, not Covid, but another spikily-haloed virus: HIV. The essay expresses the wisdom, epidemiological expertise and hard-fought shamelessness of the countless militant lesbians and gays who refused to be blackmailed by the state into monogamy, abstinence, or a 'work ethic' — and who 'invented safe sex' as the bedrock of their promiscuous culture long before AIDS. Following Crimp, it is my view that one of the many crimes of capitalism's terraformers besides incubating coronaviruses by destroying biodiversity — is their theft of untold proletarian sex hours via the imposition of work, and the concomitant disappearance from history of gigawatts of cumulative erotic bliss. The denial of pleasure to populations is a grave historic harm, and the denial by some leftists of the centrality of pleasure to liberation struggles is a correspondingly serious error.

(Lewis, 2020)

In this essay, Lewis posits that people are 'collectively turned off.' It would be ironic, however, to blame this condition on a virus that has forced a heightened awareness of the porousness, permeability, and entanglements of human bodies on a mass scale. It is rather explained, Lewis (2021) argues, by 'the capitalist ordering of sex and the erotic' in an era of imperial decline.

Like Kay Gabriel, Sophie Lewis (2020) demonstrates an acute sensitivity to the lessons of past queer struggles about capital's capacity for co-optation. Today's capitalist culture constantly compels its entrepreneurial, self-optimizing subject to consume, to be happy, and to enjoy, yet this 'stressful pressurised prurience isn't remotely conducive to actual, guards-down, polymorphous

experimentation.’ Lewis continues: ‘Yes, porn is now precisely taxonomized and accessible, hooking up is algorithmically managed, being “horny on main” has gained acceptability, yet desire seems elusive.’ Invoking the legacy of the women’s liberation, gay liberation, and AIDS activist movements, Lewis argues that the pursuit of our mutual bodily vulnerabilities could be the basis of a transformed social order. That is, securing the conditions for a collective turn-on becomes possible when erotic fulfillment is treated as continuous with the transformation of social relations as a whole. For Lewis, Gleeson, and Gabriel alike, this entails the abolition of prisons and borders, the overturning of the wage relation and system of private property, the socialization of care, the securing of bodily autonomy and leisure, and the creation of ecologies that sustain a liveable planet for humans and non-humans.

Nonetheless, this history of co-optation and recuperation has also led to far more pessimistic assessments of the political potential of our desires (see Srinivasan, 2021; Malatino, 2022).<sup>19</sup> The polemicist Andrea Long Chu, for instance, has found in the history of radical queer and feminist struggle a more cautionary tale. In an *N+1* essay about political lesbianism, Chu (2018) argues that the failures of the movement spoiled the romance of political desire — that is, the romance that desire can be brought under the control of our political will. In her provocative pamphlet *Females*, Chu (2019: 11) instead advances the notion that human consciousness is defined by the ‘psychic operation in which the self is sacrificed to make room for the desire of another.’ In other words, our desires are determined externally, be it by ‘a boyfriend’s sexual needs’ or by ‘a set of cultural expectations.’ The ‘universal existential condition,’ Chu (*ibid.*: 11-12) pens, is the experience of being ‘hollowed out, made into an incubator for an alien force.’ Her insistence that everyone’s desires are determined, problematic, and unrealizable fulfills a critical function. It seeks to free trans people from the obligation to legitimize their desires to the wider public, to prove metaphysical claims about their

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<sup>19</sup> A recent revival in the Marxist feminist tradition of Social Reproduction Theory has provided astute observations about the capture of care, love, and desire within the capitalist order. These texts demonstrate how integral such affective stances are to the naturalization of the exploitative conditions of unwaged or underpaid reproductive activities disproportionately performed by racialized, immigrant women (Gonzalez and Neaton, 2014; Bhattacharya, 2017; Jaffe, 2020; Jaffe, 2021; Hester and Srnicek, 2023).

existence that align with a progressive or emancipatory politics, and to deny the human complexity of their affective lives.

Where does this leave the question of political agency, solidarity, and transformation? This thesis has argued that desire refuses to function as a mere instrument for the advancement of radical politics. Its unruliness means that it can be swiftly recuperated by the capitalist state. However, this recuperation has historically occurred under specific conditions, when demands for sexual liberation and erotic fulfillment are severed from the demands for a total transformation of global social relations. Neither the gay liberationists, the black lesbian feminists, nor the AIDS activists could know where they were headed. As they struggled to eliminate the structures that produced the violences, exclusions, and dispossessions of their present, they were also marching into a world that was making itself anew. In this process of renewal, much of their revolutionary imagining was dismantled or recuperated. However, these worldmaking projects never fully dissolved. As they splintered off, reconfigured, and re-emerged, what persisted was their conviction that by creating conditions under which people can maximally participate in the collective eroticization of their lives, a historical tendency would be built that undermines the hierarchies and differentiations that sustain the global social order. Queer and trans radicals have long understood that the policing of deviant sexualities is central to capital's drive towards fragmentation, isolation, and division. Queer worldmaking negates this process, threatening to conjure a world of disalienated pleasure, bodily self-determination, and erotic freedom. And it takes this task seriously.



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