

**Counterpublic Histories, Radical Queer Negativity, and Creaturely Life:
Exploring a Literary Archive of Queer Spaces in New York City**

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Abstract

My dissertation is a comparative study of David Wojnarowicz's *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (1991), Samuel R. Delany's *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999), and Eileen Myles's *Inferno (A Poet's Novel)* (2010). I conceive of the memoirs as a literary archive of queer spaces situated in New York City in the last quarter of the 20th century. Crucially, the memoirs recall queer spaces as sites of counterpublic experience. The guiding questions for my dissertation are: how does this literary archive function, how are the different queer spaces represented, and why is this archive significant. The queer spaces described in the memoirs include physical environments, relational practices, and queer imaginaries. The memoirs bear witness to the ways that the AIDS epidemic dismantled queer spaces. They also document the destructive impact of gentrification as a material and social process. In doing so they address how contemporary queer culture in North America is shaped by the losses of queer spaces. Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles use personal narratives to convey the ways struggles over visibility and freedom register on their bodies and resonate in their emotional and intellectual experiences. They explore the meaning of queer spaces in terms of the material nature of history—how history moves within the body and through spatial relations. I theorize the materialization of history in the memoirs as expressions of creaturely life and radical queer negativity. These modes of expression primarily emerge from the memoirs' central thematic concerns of freedom and visibility in relation to queer spaces. In conveying the materialization of queer history within the body and through spatial relations, the three authors become pivoting subjects. They bear witness to their own counterpublic experiences in queer spaces in order to consider the possibilities of liberated queer futures.

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Introduction

Defining My Project

My dissertation is a comparative study of David Wojnarowicz's *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (1992), Samuel R. Delany's *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999), and Eileen Myles's *Inferno (A Poet's Novel)* (2010). I conceive of the memoirs as a literary archive of queer spaces situated in New York City in the last quarter of the 20th century. Crucially, the memoirs recall queer spaces as sites of counterpublic experience. The guiding questions for my dissertation are: how does this literary archive function, how are the different queer spaces represented, and why is this archive significant. The queer spaces described in the memoirs include physical environments, relational practices, and queer imaginaries. The memoirs bear witness to the ways that the AIDS epidemic dismantled queer spaces. They also contend with the destructive impact of gentrification as a material and social process. In doing so they address how contemporary queer culture in North America is shaped by the losses of queer spaces.

In the very recent past, queer counterpublic experiences, including anti-assimilation, produced the Stonewall Riots, Gay Liberation, and AIDS activism. It was also queer counterpublic experiences and perceptions that enabled the creative and pragmatic terms of queer survival in the face of homophobia and allowed for coalitional social movements. Yet, in the contemporary moment, where queerness is assimilated within heteronormative institutions, and queer spaces continue to be dismantled in the process of gentrification, there is a profound reluctance to acknowledge queer identities and communities as counterpublic formations and possibilities. At the same time, contemporary queer culture in its visible and vocal manifestations lacks a mobilized coalitional presence, even as conditions of homophobia, poverty, and racism

continue to harm queer lives. I undertook my dissertation in order to reckon with these dissonances and contradictions I perceive in current queer culture, and to consider them in light of the histories of queer counterpublic experiences that the memoirs witness and express.

Each of the authors offers different perspectives, ten years apart, on the last quarter of the 20th century in New York City. Wojnarowicz compiles and publishes *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* in 1991 in the midst of the AIDS crisis. Delany publishes *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* in 1999 following massive “redevelopment” of the Times Square neighborhood. Myles publishes her *Inferno (A Poet’s Novel)* in 2010, looking back over thirty-five years. My dissertation examines how these historical contexts shape the ways Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles write about queer spaces in personal, political, and creative terms.

A premise of my project is that in the 21st century, material and social processes of gentrification affect queer culture in specific ways. These processes enable the erasure of queer counterpublic histories while simultaneously enforcing regimes of normativity. For queers of Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles’s generation, assimilation into gentrified heteronormative culture was hardly an option. Significantly, it is also an option they resist through their writing. In their representations of queer space as sites of counterpublic experience, the three authors intervene in the value systems and expectations of contemporary gentrified queer culture. Their memoirs are vivid reminders of experiences of non-assimilation as well as queer opposition to gentrification. They encourage critical questioning of why assimilation and gentrification seem desirable or necessary for queers in the present.

The memoirs record quotidian life in queer spaces that have been dismantled in New York City through gentrification and the impact of the AIDS crisis. The texts trace how relational practices and queer imaginaries that are needed for queer activism, creative production,

and sexual communities, have also disappeared along with these sites. All three authors write about dealing with the loss of queer spaces in their own lives, whether that disappearance is going on around them or they are looking back at what has since disappeared. Thus, one of the most significant things about this literary archive I have chosen is that it develops and amplifies historical consciousness about the existence of queer counterpublic culture in New York and the ways it has been threatened and diminished through alterations to queer space.

My project considers how the elegiac tension surrounding the losses of queer spaces is complicated and subverted in the texts. Each of the authors approaches their past to contend with experiences of marginalization and liberation. These memoirs are not nostalgic curations of memory, nor do they uphold teleological notions of progress that life is improving for queer people in the context of neoliberalism. I argue that the three authors become pivoting subjects within their memoirs. They bear witness to the past in order to express the reparative possibilities of queer spatial futures. This pivoting is one of the qualities of their looking back.

I propose that the three texts by Delany, Wojnarowicz and Myles contribute to archives of queer memory that Jack Halberstam argues are needed to record and track the subcultures of the queer past (2005: 169). Halberstam asserts that “the archive is not simply a repository; it is also a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record of queer activity” (2005: 169-70). Using these elements of the archive articulated by Halberstam, I analyze the three memoirs in order to illuminate how they represent queer spaces and why their representations are significant in the present.

My intention for this project is to generate more critical discussions about counterpublic histories and the state of contemporary queer cultures in North America. In writing this dissertation I contribute to a tradition of recent queer feminist theorists, who, as Kate Eichhorn

explains, “take seriously how past political moments might be used to understand social change in the present—a present not quite yet obtainable” (2013: 52).

I argue that the memoirs by Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles offer insights about what has happened to queer freedom and visibility in the 21st century. As a scholar, I join queer feminists in taking what Eichhorn describes as “an unabashed interest in understanding the past as an essential, generative, and complex scene of contemporary political struggle” (2013: 52). I study the writing of Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles together in order to discover how their different representations and perceptions of queer space hold liberating potential in the present and in the future. Imperative to my project is the understanding, articulated by Eichhorn, “that one never can know for certain when one is really past something and...that the scrap heap may be as much a source of parody and pleasure as it is a location from which to strategize on present and future political intervention” (2013: 54). My project is an attentive return to the history that still lies before us in these texts.

Defining My Focus

I am drawn to this literary archive of queer spaces because it presents the perspectives of three writers who record and represent counterpublic history through their personal narratives. In expressing minoritarian experiences, their texts were radical acts at the times in which they wrote and published them. But the authors were also inspired and emboldened by the queer spaces that they encountered and occupied—those physical environments, relational practices, and queer imaginaries, that they document and recall in their texts.

Other projects on the three authors’ work might consider *Close to the Knives* in relation to Wojnarowicz’s visual art, or *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* in terms of Delany’s

science fiction, or *Inferno (A Poet's Novel)* as an examination and extension of Myles's poetics, but these are not the areas of concern for my dissertation. The aim and scope of my project is to closely examine the different representations of queer spaces in the three memoirs and consider their significance. I read the texts as extensions of the queer lives that produced them. The concept of queer space allows me to analyze the three memoirs together through a relational framework. In particular, I discuss how the authors represent queer spaces situated in New York City in the pre-AIDS era and during the midst of the AIDS crisis. I also study how they represent the continuing impact of gentrification as a material and social process, during this historical period.

The memoirs are a means for Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles to contend with the marginalization of their queer identities, explore forms of freedom in queer spaces, and make their experiences and perceptions visible. The authors use personal narratives to convey the ways struggles over freedom and visibility register on their bodies and resonate in their emotions, sensations, and perceptions. They each explore the meaning of the queer spaces in terms of the material nature of history—how history moves within the body and through spatial relations. Jennifer Doyle argues that when artists use material experience for their creative practice, they are able to express and render “the historical dimensions of experience itself,” and “how it feels to occupy a position, to be in a specific kind of body, to belong to a certain community, to survive, to experience, or to be asked to embody experience for others” (2013: 146).

I theorize the materialization of history as expressions of creaturely life and radical queer negativity in the memoirs. These modes of expression primarily emerge from the texts' central thematic concerns of freedom and visibility in relation to queer space. Creaturely life and radical queer negativity both dwell in melancholic awareness and convey attentiveness and

responsiveness to experiences of queer states of exception within gentrified culture and its normative regimes.

Lauren Berlant asks about contemporary life, “What happens to optimism when futurity splinters as a prop for getting through life?” (2011: 19). The narrators in the memoirs are faced with the splintering of futurity in their confrontation with the losses of queer space, the violence of homophobia, and the AIDS crisis. Radical queer negativity and creaturely life emerge as modes of expression that materialize these experiences of queer history within the body and through spatial relations.

Radical queer negativity is a combination of affectivities that can be traced to social movement, political protest, and the understanding of failure as a form of intervention within normative regimes. José Esteban Muñoz (2009) and Jack Halberstam (2011) emphasize the difference between forms of affect associated with radical queer negativity and those of queer negativity understood as antisocial. Halberstam has argued that the problem with the antisocial turn in queer theory by theorists like Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman is not about “the meaning of negativity,” which can be found in whole range of “political projects” (2009: 109). Rather, Halberstam’s criticism is that the materials considered relevant for the study of queer negativity are a body of work that is too limited: “On one hand the gay male archive coincides with the canonical archive, and on the other hand it narrows that archive down to a select group of antisocial queer aesthetes and camp icons and texts” (Halberstam 2009:109). My project seeks to expand this body of work. I examine the particular ways Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles express radical queer negativity, and I consider the social and relational significance of these expressions. Muñoz also makes an argument for opening up the canon of queer negativity, and he points specifically to the need for a critical re-evaluation of its antisocial and antirelational

representations. He states that “Queer feminist and queer of color critiques are the powerful counterweight to the antirelational,” and therefore they are crucial for studying and teaching queer histories, literatures, and theories (Muñoz 2009: 17). My project engages in this critical re-evaluation as I trace the expressive modes of radical queer negativity in the memoirs.

I also theorize the texts as expressions of creaturely life, a concept I take from Eric L. Santner and his interpretation of Walter Benjamin’s notion of “the creaturely” (2006). Queer creaturely life manifests in these texts as an act of witnessing and also of resistance. As an expressive mode it is shown to be a method for surviving what Berlant defines as crisis ordinariness in contemporary life (2011). I show how creaturely expression emerges in the memoirs as a desire that is resistant to normative progression, and as a refusal to go on without relational change. It is present in acts of intimacy and creation in the texts. I also argue that expressions of creatureliness are reflected in the style and comportment emerging from experiences of being queer minoritarian subjects in New York City in the last quarter of the 20th century.

David Wojnarowicz (1954-1992), Samuel Delany (1942-) and Eileen Myles (1949-) were self-taught in the creative disciplines in which they worked, although they all had mentors and distinct influences. They have each stated that their creative development in an interdisciplinary context outside of institutional professionalization spurred their self-invention as creators and critical thinkers. This element of self-invention also helps to generate the representations of queerness in their work. It is a means they use to contend with queer marginality, explore freedom in queer spaces, and make their experiences visible.

Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles continually assert there is something uniquely radical and different about queerness as intersectional identities and experiences of desire. In this sense,

the writers embrace the marginalization that accompanies their minoritarian perspectives and locations while also challenging homophobia and other forms of discrimination that produce their marginalization.

I argue that the stakes in looking back for Myles, Delany, and Wojnarowicz involve making experiences in queer space visible and conveying the complexity of these experiences. The memoirs challenge the erasure of queer counterpublic histories that accompanies the dismantling queer spaces. In doing so, they also challenge and critique the conditions of gentrification culture. Additionally, the stakes of looking back for all of them are to convey queer histories through personal narratives of counterpublic experience. The memoirs provide a kind of offering to younger generations of queers as well as to the authors' contemporaries, and even to the authors themselves as a form of self-preservation. The statement in this offering is: This is where I came from. This is how I've survived: Don't forget. And don't despair.

The minoritarian perspectives expressed in the memoirs are often situated in the street, occupying it as a transient location of creative and political potential. The life of the street documented in these texts is also a counterpublic space. The language the authors use and the experiences they represent come from the streets, emphasizing counterpublic energies and specificities through a sense of vivid locality. The three memoirs convey experiences of queer denizens, just hanging around, by detailing impressions of the sensorium of queer space that the narrators explore, encounter, and imagine in New York City. The other sites represented in the memoirs are the Hudson River piers, the abandoned buildings of the Lower East Side, the porn cinemas of Times Square and 42nd Street, the East Village clubs, and the poet's apartment. All of these spaces emerge and extend from the street that the narrators occupy, day and night. In the texts, being in the counterpublic spaces of the street also means being critically located at the

margins of heteronormative institutions, reckoning with neoliberal systems and structures that organize wealth and power, and contending with gentrification.

Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles generated their creative and critical voices, developed their narrative focus, and honed their talents and passions, from marginalized locations that were also positions of risk-taking. My project aims to discover what was at stake for the three authors in writing these memoirs. Their texts express the kind of queer imaginations that Sarah Schulman describes as being able to comprehend and envision, “a more humane, truthful, and open way of life, in which their expressions and self-perceptions would not have to be diminished for the approval of straight people” (2012: 11). Vitally, this imagination, according to Schulman, allows queers, “To be more assertive about their own experience” (2012: 11).

Self-awareness and self-assertion are complexly wrought in each of the three memoirs. Wojnarowicz was a visual artist as well a writer before he died of AIDS in 1992. Delany is a prolific science fiction writer, and the breadth of his cultural criticism as a public intellectual encompasses both critical race studies and sexuality studies. Myles is a poet, art critic, and essayist. However their writing also shares key elements: They each emphasize autobiographical accounts of queer experience, they each contend directly with the trauma experienced by queer people during the AIDS crisis and its aftermath, and they all consider how contested queer spaces, intersectional identities, and coalitional politics are central to queer experience.

The precise geographical and temporal focus of my dissertation is determined by the three texts I have selected. The Hudson River piers and the Lower East Side neighborhood are primary sites of queer space in Wojnarowicz’s text. Delany had moved to the Upper West Side by the 1990s when he wrote his text, but the neighborhood of Times Square and Forty-Second

Street is his sole focus. The East Village and Soho are the major sites for Myles's representations of queer space in her memoir.

New York City was one of largest sites for queer culture in the late 1970s, the 1980s, and the 1990s. During this historical period, queers found more safety in numbers to be visible, to form communities, and to mobilize politically. There were chances and opportunities to participate in queer subcultures and to develop a personal and political sense of queer visibility. For many queers of the authors' generation, born in the 1940s and 1950s, the choice to call New York home was related to identity and safety. It was often a necessary choice. David Wojnarowicz told his friend, Cynthia Carr, who later became his biographer, that he hated the art world in New York, adding, "If I were straight, I'd move to a small town right now and get a job in a gas station" (qtd. in Carr 2012: 275). Along with San Francisco, the queer population in New York City was one of the hardest hit by the AIDS epidemic. Thousands of people in New York died from AIDS or lost friends and lovers. As such, New York was a key site for AIDS activism.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, pockets of the urban landscape of New York still provided crucial spaces for counterpublic practice. Disenfranchised areas of the city where queer spaces emerged could allow for creative and cultural freedom outside of institutions. With a lack of infrastructure came a temporary lack of surveillance and heavy regulation. Despite conditions of poverty and destitution, the major influx of street drugs, and the subsequent waves of law enforcement followed by gentrification, these were also strong neighborhoods where communities of New Yorkers flourished. People who lived in these areas and considered them home created the public and semi-public atmospheres in the streets, stores, clubs, churches, temples, and other community hubs. Queer spaces were immersed in these environments, whether overtly present or covertly hidden. Importantly, the neighbourhoods were also more

affordable areas to live for people with lower incomes, or without income, including artists, activists, and cultural workers of all kinds. In the Lower East Side in particular, buildings were abandoned by the state or landlords, and could be scavenged and occupied.

Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s in New York City, the trauma of the AIDS epidemic coincided and interacted with multiple forms of gentrification and city planning practices that delegitimized, regulated, and shut down queer sexual culture in Manhattan. By the start of the 21st century, queer sexual subcultures moved into virtual spaces. My focus in the dissertation is the tenor of the time and place during the transition of gentrification in New York City in the last quarter of the 20th century. The tenor of this time and place is also mediated by the state of emergency that the AIDS crisis signifies. It is a historical period in which queer spaces generated counterpublic experiences just prior to, and then in opposition to, gentrification. It is also a period in which queer communities were fundamentally altered by the AIDS epidemic.

What made the situation of gentrification dire for queer culture in New York City is that the disappearance of queer spaces was often accompanied by the disappearance of relational practices and queer imaginaries that generated and sustained counterpublic experiences and formations. In their recording of the dismantling of queer spaces in New York City, I argue that the three memoirs expose and intervene in the economic and political transformation that Schulman has referred to as “the gentrification of the mind” (2012). Schulman defines this “spiritual gentrification,” which has accompanied the physical loss of queer space, as a homogenization of “complexity, difference, and dynamic dialogical action for change” (2012: 14). According to Schulman, this form of gentrification can produce “an internal replacement” and “diminished consciousness” that has “alienated people from the concrete process of social

and artistic change” (2012: 14). The memoirs by Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles emerge from pre-gentrified queer histories. They are resistant, angry, and grieving in the face of gentrification.

Defining My Method

I use the conceptual framework of queer space for my dissertation because spatial constructs, practices, and histories are fundamentally related to literature through language and narrative. As Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter point out, “Space, both as habitation and as an arena of power can be described” (1997: 8). Queer space as a method of analysis is useful because it emphasizes the importance of material relations—how we move through space and in relation to each other. As a methodology centred in material experiences and relations, my use of queer spatial theory is intersectional. It draws on critical theories of sexuality, gender, race, and class, considering them in terms of quotidian experiences. In the memoirs, the use of first-person narration to represent experiences of queer spaces, offers what Doyle defines as “a site of becoming, of subject formation...that produces the conditions of possibility for recognition, understanding, and difference” (2013: 146).

I use a comparative approach to identify the commonalities and differences between the memoirs in terms of how they represent material and affective experiences of queer spaces. I’m making the assertion that these memoirs are significant works of literature that demand close and attentive study. By considering the three memoirs as a single archive, one of my aims for this project is to understand the texts in relation to each other and to examine the collaborations and opposition between them. To approach these three memoirs in terms of how they represent queer spaces as physical environments, relational practices, and queer imaginaries, does not imply a tautological treatment. Rather, I’ve infused my reading of this archive with an analysis of how its

language, poetics, and narratives are used to document and represent queer counterpublic experiences, generated in different kinds of queer spaces, in contradictory ways. I am guided by Jasbir K. Puar's questions: "How do we acknowledge and theorize 'difference' in queer spaces? How do multiple identities, intersectionality and social difference make the construction of queer space possible?" (2002: 936). The conceptual framework of queer space allows me to approach the three memoirs in comparative terms and address these questions articulated by Puar.

A method of close reading allows me to examine how the texts document queer spaces in New York in the last quarter of the 20th century and the tenor of that time and place. It is the individuality of the narrative voices and the particular kinds of queer spaces they represent that differentiate the three texts I have selected and make their personal accounts of counterpublic perceptions and minoritarian experiences expansive. To write their memoirs, the three authors each draw on their own distinct inspirations and orientations as creative artists and critical thinkers. They also express their queer identity in relation to their own experiences of gender, race, and class.

Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration (1991) describes Wojnarowicz's experiences as a white gay man in America at the end of the 20th century. It begins in the 1970s when he lived in New York as a homeless youth, but primarily traces his adult years as an artist and activist in the 1980s and early 1990s. I examine the way the text represents the queer spaces of the Hudson River piers and the subcultures that existed there, pre-AIDS. I also examine the major shift that Wojnarowicz documents in his text: the impact of the AIDS epidemic.

Wojnarowicz witnesses how AIDS fundamentally alters the queer spaces he writes about, though by the time his text was published those spatial alterations were only beginning to emerge. The urban landscape Wojnarowicz was familiar with in New York still existed in 1991. Most of the

Hudson River piers had been torn down, however, and much of his community was being decimated by AIDS. The queer subculture Wojnarowicz was a part of prior to AIDS was largely replaced by AIDS activism, a political movement motivated by the desperate context of the epidemic, the Culture Wars, and the Reagan years. However, elements of the pre-AIDS queer subcultures, such as experiences of marginality and sex-positive expression, also invigorated AIDS activism and informed its messages.

In *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, published in 1999, Delany investigates a particular kind of queer space: the neighborhood and porn cinemas around 42nd Street and Times Square in the 1980s, and its subsequent “redevelopment” beginning in the 1990s. Delany’s text details the queer subculture of this queer space, in which he considers himself to be a participant. He documents how the “redevelopment” of the physical urban landscape in New York, including the zoning laws regarding sex businesses in the city, impinge on his life as a black queer man and on the queer subcultures he witnessed and participated in around 42nd Street and Times Square. The underlying analysis throughout his text deals with the ideology and discourse used to institutionalize and control queer sexuality in heteronormative terms. Delany also critiques the process underway by the 1990s of obliterating marginalized, active, oppositional queer subcultures. He notes how the dominant form of queer visibility that emerged in this context was contingent upon incorporating and expressing heteronormative and gentrified values and behaviors. By the time Delany writes his text in the last decade of the 20th century, he has witnessed these spatial processes and their aftermath occur in New York. The AIDS activism that Wojnarowicz addresses in his text is no longer prominent in 1999 when Delany’s text is published, and many of its sex-positive and counterpublic ideas were lost and altered when thousands of queers in Delany and Wojnarowicz’s generation died of AIDS.

Published in 2010, Myles's *Inferno (A Poet's Novel)*, looks back at the last two and half decades of the 20th century in New York City, concluding in the aftermath of the AIDS epidemic. Arriving in New York in 1974, Myles describes her experiences of coming out as a poet and a white lesbian at the end of seventies, and the way these identities manifested in her life throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Her work witnesses and records her impressions and experiences of the queer spaces she created and occupied in New York during this time, which have since disappeared or transformed through new forms of spatial practice. Many of her personal reflections also offer a critical consciousness of the ways in which heteronormativity and gentrification under late capitalism have impacted her life. They also reflect her insights and impressions are generated retrospectively through poetic perceptions. She appropriates what has become a canonic literary structure in Western culture, Dante's *Inferno*, including his model of the labyrinth. In doing so, she expands and intervenes in this traditional framework of meanings by drawing on the context of her own life experience and her memories of queer spaces in New York.

My project contributes to the growing scholarship on the writing of Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles. As much as this dissertation is a study of representations of queer spaces in the three memoirs, it is also a study of how these writers express and represent their subjectivities. I read their texts as unique evidence of the writers' impressions of themselves and the world. To do this, I consider the experiences, perceptions, and fantasies represented in the memoirs; I trace the ways they document material, affective, and sensorial life; and I analyze the language in each of the texts, as well as the use of rhetorical and narrative devices. In my research and focus I am using an intimate poetics of scale which dwells on aspects of queer quotidian experience that the memoirs express in original ways.

Chapter Two: Exploring the Archive: Key Concepts and Contexts

Entering the Archive

In this first chapter I fully define the parameters of each of the guiding questions for my dissertation: How does the literary archive of queer spaces function, how are the different queer spaces represented, and why is this archive significant.

I explain the conceptualizations of queerness and queer space that are key for my project. I also discuss the theoretical ideas I am drawing on to understand queer spaces as sites for relational practices and queer imaginaries. Finally, I consider this literary archive in terms of the narrative techniques, literary devices, and poetics used in each of the texts, which in turn are influenced by the creative environments in which they were developed.

My discussion then turns to an overview of the historical context in which Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles live and write. I consider the Downtown scene, public sex culture, the AIDS crisis, the Culture Wars, gentrification, AIDS activism, Queer Nation, and queer studies in the academy. In each case I discuss how these social and political conditions influenced the focus of the three memoirs and their representations of queer space.

To consider what constitutes the archive, I offer a comparative overview of the texts in terms of their depictions of queer space, and I demonstrate how my dissertation accounts for the commonalities and differences in these representations. I examine the two key thematic concerns the memoirs share: freedom and visibility in relation to queer space. The critical treatment of these terms in the memoirs emphasizes their contested meanings. I explore how queer space itself is a contested space within the memoirs. I then provide an overview of the specific characteristics and aesthetics of their representations of queer spaces.

I conclude this chapter by theorizing the significance of the archive in terms of the expressive modes of radical queer negativity and creaturely life in the memoirs. I discuss how these expressive modes in the texts emerge in the ways history is materialized within the body and through spatial relations. I examine the ways radical queer negativity and creaturely life are conveyed by the authors' uses of tone, style, and language.

The Concept of Queer

My own use of the term “queer” connotes an identity constituted by experiences that are erotic, cultural, and political. My dissertation considers the ways in which experiences of queerness are spatially produced. This is a state conceptualized by Juana Maria Rodríguez as “situatedness in motion: embodiment and spatiality. It is about *a self* that is constituted through and against *other selves*” (2003: 5). I argue that by focusing on material experiences within the body and through spatial relations, the three memoirs convey queerness as a form of becoming. It is rendered as an embodied experience by the texts rather than a static identity. As Sara Ahmed writes, “If orientation is a matter of how we reside in space, then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence; of how we inhabit spaces as well as ‘who’ or ‘what’ we inhabit spaces with... If we foreground the concept of ‘orientation,’ then we can retheorize this sexualisation of space, as well as the spatiality of sexual desire” (2006: 1). In the memoirs, queerness is also a form of critical perception about the structures in which it is marginalized. Queerness enables a stance of observation as an outsider or marginalized participant in heteronormative culture. It also manifests in the memoirs as counterpublic perceptions from minoritarian perspectives. As a narrative point of view in the texts, queerness is at once a glance of queer desire and an openness

that bears witness to the world. In this literary archive, queer identities are animated and change-seeking, and they exist in tension with assimilation.

The term “queer” and its critical uses for self-identification have been shaped by historical contexts. In the 1980s, the term emerged through AIDS activism, outside of academia. Michael Warner notes that it originally “carried a high-voltage charge of insult and stigma” (2012: n. pag.). In the memoirs of Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles, queer sexuality and queer sex are primary ways of representing experiences of queerness. The explicit depictions of queer sexuality in the texts are in part a response to the AIDS epidemic, as a means to mitigate gay shame. They are also used to assert self-defined queer identity in response to the AIDS crisis. Queer literature produced in New York in the 1980s and in the 1990s reflects these sex-positive representations. Personal accounts of queer experience emphasizing sex and desire became a way to reflect the activist queer culture that emerged during the AIDS crisis. These accounts were also ways to bear witness to the experiences of the thousands of queers who died during the epidemic. As Myles comments:

People were supposed to feel that they were dying because they had done wrong, they had been bad, promiscuous, done drugs, lived outside of the law, and now a virus had come. In response, there was a pro-sex thing. Theory was on the rise at the time and so it was all being theorized in terms of sex and sexuality and queerness but also in the world of literature people were just going for it. You wanted to say this space existed, and this space was beautiful and holy and dirty and excessive. That was why there was such a queer boom in publishing in the Nineties, because of AIDS....During it, and after it, as men were dying, I think lesbians, especially the ones who were affiliated with these men at the time were...being pro-sex and writing about it in very graphic ways. (Personal Interview 2012)

While pro-sex forms of queer visibility were occurring in queer counterpublic culture in New York, mainstream representations of queerness were headed on a different trajectory. As Urvashi Vaid explains, what emerged in the mainstream gay movement during the AIDS crisis was a strategy to distance itself from the “sexual liberation ethic of the seventies,” using new ways of

talking about sexual practice such as media and workshops (1995: 85). Vaid argues, “We quickly revised out community’s sexual history to point out and play up those in committed relationships.... Because of our fear of homophobia, we responded to the cultural visibility that AIDS gave to gay male sexual life with a politically motivated effort to de-emphasize the importance of sexuality in the lives of gay men” (1995: 85). This shift to de-emphasize sex and sexuality in mainstream representations of queerness is also something Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles are responding to and challenging in their memoirs.

The rise of queer theory in the academy accompanied the use of the term “queer” in activist movements. Julia Creet describes queer theory as an “interdisciplinary intellectual movement that developed out of work by lesbian and gay scholars as far back as the 1960s” (2000:413). She asserts, “Methodologically, queer theory is nomadic in that it participates in the radical project of redrawing the boundaries separating traditional boundaries of discourse and knowledge” (Creet 2000: 415). Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner conceived of queer theory as generative of “publics” that can comprehend “their own differences of privilege and struggle” (1995: 344). Almost two decades later, in 2012, Warner concludes retrospectively: “At its best queer theory has created...a kind of social space” to be shared in “as a counterpublic” (Warner 2012: n. pag.).

Throughout the 1990s, the meaning of queer was being theorized and defined in terms of difference as a destabilizing force. In 1993, Warner asserts that to use the term “queer” as self-identification is a way to embody challenges to “regimes of the normal”: “The preference for ‘queer’ represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance” (1993: xxvi). Similarly, David Halperin argues two years later, that “Queer

is ... *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*. It is an identity without an essence” (1995, 62, original emphasis). Judith Butler explains that the term “queer” critiques the notion of a static or solid “identity”: “If identity is a necessary error, then the assertion of ‘queer’ will be incontrovertibly necessary” (1993: 21). Several theorists emphasize queerness in terms of difference. Anthony Slagle thinks of “queer” as movement wherein “difference” is something to be celebrated (1995: 86). Michael Cunningham posits that the word “queer” often “emphasizes difference,” which it asserts in private and public space (1992: 63). Robin Brontsema concurs, explaining how queer difference yields inclusion and multiplicity: “Instead of solely relying upon sexual object choice as the basis of sexual identity, queer allowed—and welcomed—a multiplicity of sexualities and genders. Difference was not a challenge, but an invitation” (2004: 4).

In an interview in 2015, Jane Ward makes a distinction about what queerness means in the contemporary moment. Her understanding of the meaning of queer identity resonates with the way it is represented in each of the memoirs. In describing what she views as the difference between queer people and straight people who have homosexual sex, she asserts that “If straight people want in on gay life, that’s about something more than homosexual sex” (Ward 2015: n. pag.). She argues that while homosexual desire and sex are “part of the human condition,” queer life is about “queer subculture” (Ward 2015: n. pag.). She explains that as an expression of queer life, queer subculture is “anchored to a long tradition of anti-normative political practices and anti-normative sex practices” (Ward 2015: n. pag.). Ward goes on to assert that queer life is also about an “appreciation for a much broader array of bodies and kinds of relationships,” (2015: n. pag.). I argue that these are distinctions about queer identity and experience that often get lost in contemporary gentrified culture where the emphasis is on normativity and sameness.

Ward's understanding of queer life as participation in queer subcultures, and her articulation of the ways these queer subcultures are made distinct through anti-normative practices and values, are clarifying for my study of the three memoirs. Like Ward, Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles assert that queerness has the potential to be an experience that is both beyond and in relation to sex and desire. Crucially, that extra or relational aspect of queerness is understood by all of them as an ethical and political orientation of queer identity that is non-normative and indeed potentially liberating. By extension, it is therefore a challenge or an opposition to gentrified culture and its regimes of normativity. Like Ward, the narratives in the three memoirs all assert that there is a historical precedent for these non-normative queer ways of being and subcultural formations, which is something that often gets obscured in contemporary queer culture. The meanings and orientations of queerness described by Ward can be understood as counterpublic.

Ward's analysis offers further insight about the increasing assimilation of queerness into gentrified culture and normative institutions within contemporary society. She argues that what makes straight people who engage in homosexual sex straight is that "they have no interest in being part of queer subculture...even though they could if they wanted to" (Ward 2015: n. pag.). She concludes that in these conditions, homosexual sex and desire are "being enacted in the service of heteronormativity" (Ward 2015: n. pag.). My project asserts that gentrification as a material and social process enables these conditions because of its normative regimes and its destruction of queer spaces that are sites of counterpublic experience.

The Concept of Queer Space

The notion of queer space and queer spatial studies has emerged as a central concept in queer scholarship over the last twenty years. Ingram, Bouthillette, Retter define the term, “queer space,” as “an expanding set of queer sites that function to destabilize heteronormative relations and thus provide more opportunities for homoerotic expression and related community” (1997: 449). “Queerscape” is “a physical landscape that harbours queer sites and queer space, where resistance to heteronormative constraints and a diversity of homoerotic relations intensify, cumulatively over time” (Ingram, Bouthillette, Retter 1997: 449). Beyond the physical aspect of “queerscape,” there is what Ingram describes as “a social overlay” which can “embody processes that counter those that directly harm, discount, isolate, ghettoize, and assimilate” (1997: 40-41). In this way, he notes that “queerscape” is “a cumulative kind of spatial unit, a set of places, a plane of subjectivities constituting a collectivity, which involve multiple alliances” for “a variety of activities, transactions, and functions” (Ingram 1997: 41).

Significantly, the linguistic root for these concepts of *queer space* and *queerscape* come from the Flemish suffix “schap” meaning district or combination of places, as well as portions of the body (Ingram 1997: n. 15). Thus, from the beginning, this concept is material in nature. It holds elements of the personal, the physical, the social, the environment, and connotations of both private and public. In order to attain fuller meaning, the definition of “schap” also implicitly calls for a narrative about which district, which combination of places, or which portions of the body are being referred to or experienced. Therefore it is a term directly related to the need for narratives, including written ones.

Jean-Ulrick Désert calls attention to the significance of desire and hope in relation to the occupation and habitation of queer space. He states, “A queer space is an activated zone made

proprietary by the occupant or flâneur, the wanderer....Our cities and landscapes double as queer spaces...the place of fortuitous encounters and juxtapositions. It is the place in which our sensibilities are tested” (Désert 1997: 20-22). He goes on to explain, “Queer space is in large part the function of wishful thinking or desires that become solidified: a seduction of the reading space where queerness, at a few brief points and for some fleeting moments, dominates the (heterocentric) norm, the dominant social narrative of the landscape” (Désert 1997: 21). Informed by Désert’s articulation, my project explores how queer spaces and the experiences they generate are represented in literature. In particular I consider how these representations have shifted and changed since Stonewall. In my dissertation I examine how the solidification of queer desire and wishful thinking emerge through language, narrative, genre, and form. I also analyze how expressions of queerness in literature can fleetingly become dominant social narratives of the city or landscape, and how they are made temporary in the face of heteronormativity.

Dianne Chisholm defines queer space as a “fluid conceptualization....deriving its sense from post-structuralism” as “a practice, production, and performance of space beyond just the mere habitation of built and fixed structures” (2005: 10). She narrows down the concept via her assertion that queer space contains a quality of agency in its “appropriation of space for bodily, especially sexual, pleasure” (Chisholm 2005: 10). Some of the other elements of queer space, according to Ingram, Bouthillette, and Retter, include queer networks, queer nodes as “important or strategic queer sites for the ongoing functioning and contact of some of the networks marginalized in heteronormative political economies,” queer communities, queer placemaking, and queer appropriation of social and physical space (1997: 449).

From the notions of queer space and queerscape emerges the concept of the queer city. Chisholm gives a definition of this concept that is notably *concrete* in both senses of the word, based on “empirical history” and historical documentation (2005: 10). She calls the queer city: “queer sites—buildings, streets, quarters and neighbourhoods that have a history of gay and/or lesbian occupation and that historians cite from city archives and sources not yet archived” (Chisholm 2005: 10). From the notion of the queer city comes “queer constellations,” a term coined by Chisholm. It is relevant to my study insofar as these constellations are understood as conceptual forms for the ways late 20th century and early 21st century queer (urban) spaces are represented visually and stylistically through written language. Chisholm explains queer constellations as “dialectical images,” which she insists borrow heavily from Walter Benjamin’s city writing, representing: “the space of the city and the space of city history in [literary] montage” (2005: 11). This includes versions and revisions of “the flâneur and flânerie, the bohème, allegory, porosity, topographical memory, and monadology,” which are all present in Benjamin’s writing (Chisholm 2005: 10). For the purposes of my study, what is useful in Chisholm’s concept is the stipulation that “queer constellations image the city of late capitalism, where paradoxes of development are intensified” (2005: 11). Here representations occur through dialectical imaging “to foreground contradictions that capitalism’s panoramas of expanse and narratives of progress obscure” (Chisholm 2005: 11).

Berlant and Warner explain that queer spaces in urban areas have historically developed as sites of counterpublic sexual culture: “A critical mass develops. The street becomes queer,” and the area develops “a dense, publicly accessible sexual culture” (1998: 204). This in turn creates a “base” for non-porn queer business and a voting base to influence politicians (Berlant and Warner 1998: 204). As Berlant and Warner conclude, queers are dependent on this pattern in

urban space because “if we could not concentrate a publicly accessible culture somewhere, we would always be outnumbered and overwhelmed” (1998: 204). Thus public sex culture as a space of hospitality, sexual encounter, and desire, is fundamental to political rights for queers. It assembles a queer population that has the potential to be culturally vibrant and political. As Delany explains in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, this public site that fosters and sustains queer sex culture is an important space for contact of all kinds.

Literary Devices of the Archive

The narrative techniques used by Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles were developed in the context of New Queer Writing. This literature first emerged in the Downtown scene in New York the 1970s, situated in the East Village and the Lower East Side. Robert Siegle explains that this Downtown writing, “takes its cue” from the “demystifying grittiness,” of the streets (1989: 1). New Queer Writing is characterized in part by its exploration of marginal queer lives in conjunction with marginal literary forms. Significantly, space is essential to the understanding of the queer self and queer experience in this writing. As Chisholm notes, the narratives tend to represent queer lives “as constructed on location” (2005:56). These qualities of New Queer Writing can be found in the memoirs by Wojnarowicz, Myles and Delany.

The Downtown scene was interdisciplinary and its literature was shaped by a wide range of aesthetics. The techniques of film and video influenced the representations of space and time in the writing produced in the Downtown scene. Carlo McCormick characterizes these representations as, “extended time and spliced-together composites, personal expressions in borrowed voices and modes of communication that so deeply mistrusted the compromised nature of language and pictures that representation was merely a trope” (2006: 93). According to

Marvin Taylor, literary forms that emerged in Downtown writing included: monologue, character study as the primary focus, “reconstitution of comic art forms as confessional and social medium”, “intimate literature on the language of perception”, and performance art or theatre as “a kind of phenomenological experience” (2006: 93). All of these forms focus on subjectivity, personal perspectives, and sensorial impressions, which are also key in the memoirs by Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles.

Each of three texts emphasize the present moment by conveying events as they happen. This is in keeping with a stylistic narrative current running throughout New Queer Writing that involves transgressive gestures expressing the immediacy of the present. As Robert Gluck explains, “Transgressive writing shocks by articulating the present, the one thing impossible to put into words, because language does not yet exist to describe the present” (2000:6). Berlant articulates how these aesthetics and experiences of the present interact: “Aesthetics is not only the place where we rehabilitate our sensorium by taking in new material and becoming more refined in relation to it. But it provides metrics for understanding how we pace and space our encounters with things, how we manage the too closeness of the world and also the desire to have an impact on it that has some relation to its impact on us” (2011: 12).

All three texts incorporate a collection of shorter narratives. They make use of anecdote, observation, fragmented scenes, and direct address to the reader. Chisholm points out that New Queer Writing included “New Narrative,” a movement in prose writing from the 1970s, which is an assemblage of story, theory, essay, autobiography, allegory, and fantasy, and fable, that retains an integral narrative (2005:55).

A key narrative device that is used in the memoirs is the depiction of “the impasse,” which Berlant describes as a temporal genre (2011: 4). These representations of impasse include

“the situation, the episode, the interruption, the aside, the conversation, the travelogue, and the happening” (Berlant 2011: 5). Each of these representations are found in the memoirs. I will discuss the genre of the impasse as a characteristic of queer space, later in this chapter.

The memoirs also incorporate the collaging of the real as “found material” in the form of gossip and anecdote, a technique influenced by the New York School poets such as Frank O’Hara (Gluck 2000: 7). This use of gossip and anecdote is prevalent throughout the memoirs, as a collaging of impressions and observations about the queer spaces they represent.

Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles emphasize first-hand evidence through personal experience as forms of documentation and as the grounds for analysis and argument. They each call attention to the fact that they are drawing evidence from their journals for recollection and reflection in the narratives. The journal functions as a tool of perception and insight, a source of documentation, and a way to record the shifting world around them. This form of writing reflects the authors’ emphasis in their memoirs on articulating experiences that appear ephemeral and quotidian. These experiences are often presented as meaningful in terms of queer spaces that produce them. As Muñoz writes, ephemera is, “Linked to alternate modes of textuality and narrativity like memory and performance,” and “It does not rest on epistemological foundations but is instead interested in following traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things. It is important to note that ephemera is a mode of proofing and producing arguments often worked by minoritarian culture and criticism makers” (1996: 10).

Along with the use of ephemeral evidence, the authors shift their tone throughout the narratives, mixing an objective, engaged voice of literary journalism with a more familiar, confessional voice. Wojnarowicz and Myles draw on poetic language and figurative discourse while Delany puts more emphasis on analytical language. Delany and Myles address the reader

directly, as companionable hosts, or in a conversational manner. On the other hand, Wojnarowicz's direct address carries more heightened emotional tones of anger or grief. All the authors use the language of the street combined with sophisticated rhetorical devices.

The sense of historical consciousness in the memoirs is made both more acute and more expansive by the experimental and subversive treatment of the literary genre of memoir. As the narratives slip back and forth between memories, and different eras are referenced together in juxtaposition, time is presented as non-linear and condensed. Each of the authors experiments with the notion of the return, in which the narrative ends where it began or loops past the beginning. The circularity of the narrative forms can also be interpreted as engaging in a form of decomposition, a winding down into the heart of things, or a honing. The effect is a heightening of the individuality of the "I" that the narratives present.

The authors' use of the genre of memoir emphasizes self-reflection, the role of memory, and categories of past, present, and future in relation to the development of the self. This use of genre is one basis for my comparative analysis of their work. First-person narration in the genre of memoir writing, and in the texts by Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles, often privileges individual, subjective experiences, including emotion, thought, and sensation. The narrative use of "I" in the three memoirs assumes the role of an individual witness, one who experiences the world in order to convey events as they happen. In the case of all three authors, the "I" also serves as a mask that reveals while also concealing, and generates their creative self-defined identities.

Wojnarowicz, Delany and Myles use first-person narration to represent and express different versions of the queer selves they have been and the queer spaces they have occupied. In so doing they are engaged throughout the narratives in recalling pasts that are prior to the present

moment of their narration. This is the premise of their archive. The literary conceit of inhabiting the present moment and gazing backwards can be understood as a spatial construct. It is the scaffolding, conjured through memory and imagination, on which queer spatial histories are laid by the authors to form a shelter for memory. This spatial construct is produced amidst the dismantling of queer spaces in New York produced by gentrification. This writing approach becomes an oppositional practice in the face of contemporary gentrified culture because it insists on the significance of the queer spaces that have been dismantled. The representations in the memoirs infuse the queer spaces with counterpublic histories, thereby intervening in the process of material and social gentrification that was underway by end of the 20th century.

Much of the narrative action focuses on personal and internal experiences. In the memoir texts by Wojnarowicz, Delany and Myles, interior life is as vivid and visceral as physical reality. In part this is because the three authors' interior lives help them to survive. Their interior lives represent queer spaces of creative and personal liberation, and are often the sites in which they feel most at home.

The role of the queer witness is also explored through first-person narration, producing a visceral record of queer memory situated in a particular place and time. The queer witness experiences a sense of marginality and an outsider status that are shown to be mitigated or amplified by the queer spaces the narrator inhabits or temporarily occupies. The sensation of being an observer of one's own life as it happens is salient in the narratives in these texts. This witnessing of one's own life is also related to self-preservation and self-validation in a hostile, heteronormative, and homophobic culture. This collaborative, disintegrating, productive self of the witness, who frustrates traditional narratives of development, improvement, and refinement, is a reoccurring figure in the memoirs of the three authors.

Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles each invent aspects of their lives for the scrutiny and wonder of an audience. They've created themselves as characters in the non-fiction of their memoir texts, producing self-mythologies and personal iconographies. Allegory is a device all three authors use. In Wojnarowicz's text, one central allegory are the piers as symbols of a dying country (1991). In Delany's discussion, the central allegory is the notion of the quest and the shore as home (1999). For Myles, the central allegory is the Inferno, based on Dante's allegorical narratives about the experience of living, learning, and redemption (2010). The three authors self-mythologize, using literary and cultural citations to define their histories and claim their own visibility.

Each of the memoirs contains a quality of performance in its use of poetics and rhetoric. Wojnarowicz performed essays from his text for audiences at rallies and art events. Delany's second essay in his memoir is based on a lecture he gave at a university. Myles dedicates sections of her memoir to reflections on what performance means for her development as a poet.

This literary archive of queer spaces is permeated with historical records. Wojnarowicz and Delany refer to statistics and historical or contemporary facts (1991; 1999). Myles discusses the poets she knew who were important to her as inspirations or mentors (2010). The queer spaces she creates in her memoir are teeming with literary histories that are made to feel familiar for the reader. Like *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue*, and *Close to the Knives*, *Inferno (A Poet's Novel)* is a social text full of real historical figures. A similar quality pervades Delany's memoir. He incorporates photographs and locates his narratives at specific sites that actually existed. Wojnarowicz's memoir also amplifies this sense of historical reality. His text contains a "Personal Acknowledgments" section, thanking real people, and mentioning two real sites of

queer space: the piers “along the Hudson River,” and the “42nd Street Movie Houses” around Times Square prior to redevelopment (Wojnarowicz 1991: Acknowledgments n. pag.).

Queer Space in New York City 1975-2000: An Overview

New York City was one of largest sites in North America for queer culture during the late 1970s, the 1980s, and the 1990s. What follows is a selective historical overview of the period in which Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles were writing their texts, and in particular the changes to queer space that occurred in New York during that time. By highlighting the subcultural scenes as well as the physical, social, and political landscapes in which the authors were immersed, I aim to provide a context for the ways the queer spaces are represented and imagined.

The Downtown Scene and Queer Spatial Constructs

The Downtown scene emerged in the 1970s and lasted throughout the 1980s. It was located in the Lower East Side and the East Village. The scene occurred in this specific geographic area because of cheap rent. Carlo McCormick calls it, “An ensemble choreography of motion itself best traced in the rise and fall of an infinite list of alternative spaces...featuring the re-imagining of place” (2006: 70-71). As Eichhorn explains, “emerging artists actively sought out places to occupy rather than join” (2014: 2). Abandoned storefronts were used for galleries, and many clubs opened up, filled with music, performance art, readings and film screenings. The neighborhood as a physical site was covered with street art and visual, entrepreneurial, and creative markings on every surface. Eichhorn describes how “Walls of Xeroxed posters and street art distinguished the downtown scene from other neighborhoods by creating constantly changing and highly textured facades for the neighborhood’s crumbling architecture. The aesthetic was also re-circulated in much of the work produced by artists who were part of the

scene” (2014: 10). There was a lot of collaboration between artists and the scene was intensely interdisciplinary.

Patrick Moore points out that when queer culture in the West Village moved east in the late 1970s, it was incorporated into a “Larger constellation of artists, outsiders, and radicals outside of the ghetto” (2004: 85). In the East Village, “To the extent that gay people accepted the roles of artist, outsider, and radical that had long figured in the left politics of the Lower East Side, they also accepted responsibility for leadership in those communities and for the histories contained in them” (Moore 2004: 85). Gays positioned themselves as another kind of outsider occupying the East Village, indistinguishable from artists (Moore 2004: 86). The lesbian community, which integrated into the Lower East Side, established a thriving neighborhood, including bars and a health clinic (Moore 2004: 88).

In the Downtown scene, divisions between gay and straight were undone, though heteronormativity and homophobia remained pervasive in the dominant culture. This resulted in a social fluidity within the neighbourhood that included queer subcultures and queer relational practices. The Pyramid Club that opened in December 1979 was known an artists’ club with go-go boys and drag queens, and plenty of queer customers, but it was never designated a gay club (Carr 2012: 166). There was a strong message in queer culture of the time that queer identity as a segregated cultural identity was too simplistic and limiting. This argument was expressed in an article from the summer of 1980, written by a queer journalist, David McDermott, in the *East Village Eye*. He argued that: “The whole Gay lifestyle is an anachronism left over from 1972....No one cares anymore if you are Gay or not, we care about who you are” (qtd. in Carr 2012: 166). This attack on what was perceived as a gay “clone” aesthetic was taken up by artists such as Keith Haring who stenciled “Clones, Go Home” on West Village sidewalks (Carr 2012:

166). McCormick calls it “punk-inspired anticline identity” that formed the “radicalized roots of late 1980s Queer Culture” (2006: 90). He describes the “reconstitution of sexuality” as triggered by the fluidity and questioning of self-identity and cultural hierarchies (McCormick 2006: 90).

Crucially the Downtown scene was not immersed in gentrified culture when it first developed. This meant that as sexuality was explored and openly redefined there was room for different kinds of orientations and desires that were not heteronormative. In fact these orientations and desires existed in opposition to the values and normative regimes of gentrification. This non-normative cultural energy, including the expression of sexuality, fueled counterpublic practices in queer space. Channeled through the expressionism of the Downtown scene, creative representations of sexuality in various art forms were increasingly diverse, graphic and open-ended. As Schulman explains, in these neighborhood enclaves, there was pleasure in difference, and regular, direct access to great artists and their work: “The times were social,” she writes (2012: 82, 85).

The creative work of the Downtown scene has been characterized in terms of its insurgency within American culture. My dissertation explores the ways in which these qualities of the New York urban landscape and its culture, including inclusiveness, affordability, heightened creative and sexual energy, and radical forms of expression, fostered and sustained queer subcultures in the last twenty-five years of the 20th century.

In *Inferno (A Poet's Novel)*, Myles remarks on the ways in which the creative arts and literary production were well funded during her early career as a poet in the 1970s and the early 1980s. As she explains, it was still possible to survive as an artist or writer in New York (Myles 2010: 227-228). These accessible, affordable conditions fed the vibrancy and urgency of the

Downtown scene. Even as the urban sites in which subcultures flourished were rundown and often abandoned by the city, they were also inclusive and unregulated.

Queer Space and the AIDS Crisis

A little more than 10 years after the Stonewall Riots in 1969, the AIDS epidemic had a profound impact on queer culture and politics. Beginning in the mid-1980s in New York, thousands of people, most of them gay men or trans, began to die. In 1985, in response to the crisis, the Health Department ordered the closure of the baths and other sexually oriented venues (Moore 2004: 114). Moore points out that “By the time that AIDS had been identified, many of the men who had lived in earlier authentic communities rich with a sense of history and shared experience were already dead” (2004: 93). He emphasizes the importance of archives of memory that document this period pre-AIDS and in the midst of the crisis: “It is important to talk about New York in relationship to the cultural changes effected in America by AIDS because areas such as Times Square, the Lower East Side, and Greenwich Village so clearly illustrate what has been lost in terms of the creative energy that flowed from the gay culture of the 1970s....It is impossible not to see the relationship between the loss of gay culture and creeping blandness that has spread over the city” (Moore 2004: 179).

Fran Lebowitz describes how the consequence of AIDS was that “a whole world...vanished almost without a trace” (Interview 2012). She argues that as a result of this sudden and irrevocable disappearance there are no chronicles of the queer cultures that had once existed (Interview 2012). According to Lebowitz, pre-AIDS queer culture and its sensibility “of oppression and of marginalization,” requires contextual knowledge in order to be understood (Interview 2012). However, this knowledge has become nearly inaccessible because a totally covert world of cultural creators, who fully engaged with the cultural and political context in

which they lived, have disappeared along with their audience (Interview 2012). Schulman explains that:

These dead and their friends pioneered new art ideas including performance, installation, the intersection of new technologies and live performance, improvisational new music and improvisational new dance, drag, expansions of materials and techniques. They came to New York or grew up in New York and lived in low-income areas, hustled legally or illegally for a living, made art for low-income audiences, and had an interactive relationship with urban life. (2012: 84-85)

Lebowitz compares the loss of the contextual knowledge that informed pre-AIDS queer culture, to an entire library written in disappearing ink (Interview 2012). As Schulman says, “Our disappeared friends...knew what we did, who we were. Without them, so much of what we the living have done also goes unremembered. Increasingly, I vaguely recall my dead friends and in those ways I vaguely recall myself....It puts those of us who do know what happened in the awkward position of trying to remember what we used to know in a world that officially knows none of it” (2012: 68, 70).

In the mid-1980s and early 1990s, during the emergence of the AIDS epidemic, the vital creative, social, sexual atmospheres of the Downtown scene and other subcultural queer spaces in New York were channeled into AIDS activism and queer political mobilizations. ACT UP in New York relied on accessible language, visual media, and a strong presence on the streets. As Maxine Wolfe explains, ACT UP sought out spaces “without asking...permission,” where queer culture was not expected or was previously denied access (1997: 416). ACT UP’s spatial and visual orientation was combined with political protest to preform modes of direct action. This activist approach was influenced by people with backgrounds in theatre and visual art: “They were the media generation people who had grown up with television and multimedia. They were well aware, any time we did a demo, that there would be TV camera present and what these cameras would be looking at” (Wolfe 1997: 414-15).

Queer public intellectuals and cultural workers, such as Schulman and Lebowitz, argue that there has been an erasure of the counterpublic histories emerging from AIDS activism. They also point out that there is a consistent disavowal of the impact of AIDS on queer culture, and America more broadly. This disavowal has intensified and shaped the trauma of AIDS for survivors and future generations. These conditions are not often written about in contemporary queer literature or in current cultural discussions. Yet they haunt and permeate our contemporary society. As Schulman notes:

Every gay person walking around who lived in New York or San Francisco in the 1980s and early 1990s is a survivor of devastation and carries with them the faces, fading names, and corpses of the otherwise forgotten dead...Our friends died and our world was destroyed because of the neglect of real people who also have names and faces...81,542 people have died of AIDS in New York City as of August 16, 2008. These people, our friends, are rarely mentioned. Their absence is not computed and the meaning of their loss is not considered. (2012: 45-46)

One of the impacts of this trauma, including the erasure of counterpublic histories, is the desire to assimilate into heteronormative frameworks. Schulman makes this argument explicitly: “So traumatized by mass death and the indifference of others, we assimilate into the culture that allowed us to be destroyed. We access their values and use them to replace our own in a way that undermines our distinction and strength” (2012: 156). Lebowitz argues that the traumatic aftermath of the AIDS epidemic in North America motivated queer people “to lie in a certain way,” and say to the straight world, “We’re just like you” (Interview 2012). There was a lot of cultural energy diverted into trying to make this sameness apparent (Lebowitz Interview 2012). According to Schulman, “This terrible moment of lost vision is a consequence not only of America’s lost vision but also...the unexplored trauma of the AIDS crisis, and the loss of the radical culture of mixed urbanity. Set it all against the backdrop of the Reagan/Bush years, and we discover how we got here. To a place where homosexuality loses its own transformative

potential and strives instead to be banal” (2012: 114). As Lebowitz notes, the central focus of contemporary gay right’s movements in America seems to be achieving rights for gay marriage and for gays in the military, the two most confining institutions in our society (“Public Speaking” 2010). While fights for liberation are usually about freedom, Lebowitz argues, at its heart the gay right’s fight has very little to do with freedom (“Public Speaking” 2010).

Queer Space and Queer Nation

As a movement, Queer Nation emerged from ACT UP in 1990 to challenge the demarcations between private and public space, and “to expand the boundaries in which queer expression can occur” (Slagle 1995: 90). The street becomes the setting in which Queer Nation imagined “all politics” (Berlant and Freeman 1993: 199). Struggles over queer space changed in the 1990s, especially in the aftermath of AIDS activism and the transformations it produced. Queer Nation is one manifestation of these changes. In 1992, activists and academics Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman wrote a kind of manifesto, entitled “Queer Nationality” in which they, “seek to understand the political logic” of an activist movement in America termed “Queer Nation,” that queers the country’s nationalist ideology and rhetoric (1992: 153). Their discussion addresses how the meaning of sexuality, and in particular queer sexuality, intersects with America’s national identity, as well as the conditions of individual subjects and their bodies: “Queer Nation’s outspoken promotion of a national sexuality not only discloses that mainstream national identity touts a subliminal sexuality more official than a state flower or national bird, but also makes explicit how thoroughly the local experience of the body is framed by laws, policies, and social customs regulating sexuality” (Berlant and Freeman 1992: 195).

Berlant and Freeman reflect on Queer Nation's criticism of the assimilation of queerness into heteronormative structures and privatized practices. They celebrate the presence of Queer Nation as a political movement in the public space of the streets:

Queer Nation understands the propriety of queerness to be a function of the diverse spaces in which it aims to become explicit. It names multiple local and national publics; it does not look for a theoretical coherence to regulate in advance all of its tactics: all politics in the Queer Nation are imagined on the street. Finally, it always refuses closeting strategies of assimilation and goes for the broadest and most explicit assertion of presence. (Berlant and Freeman 1992: 199)

As David Bell and Gill Valentine write of the period following the AIDS crisis, "In the face of the New Right, a new adversarial politics was needed: it was time for queers to bash back" (1995: 18). Queer Nation introduced a foot patrol called "The Pink Panthers" to help protect against overt threats of violence towards queers (Berlant and Freeman 1992: 206). Another action was "Queer Nights Out" which involved "moments of radical desegregation with roots in civil rights era lunch counter sit-ins....Invading straight bars for example, queers stage a production of sentimentality and pleasure that broadcasts the ordinariness of the queer body" (Berlant and Freeman 1992: 207). These events "appropriated the model of surprise attack" that police waged against subcultural spaces such as the bathhouse (Berlant and Freeman 1992: 207). The action was also aimed at "Demonstrating that the boundedness of heterosexual spaces is also contingent upon the (enforced) willingness of gays to remain invisible" (Berlant and Freeman 1992: 207). Conceptualizations about what it meant to be queer were developed out of these political actions and gestures. Some were printed in a broadside circulated in New York and Chicago, especially at gay pride parades, in the summer of 1990, "I Hate Straights" (Berlant and Freeman 1992: 200):

Being is not about the right to privacy: it is about the freedom to be public....It's not about the mainstream, profit margins, patriotism, patriarchy or being assimilated. It's not about being executive directors, privilege and elitism. It's about being on the margins,

defining ourselves; it's about genderfuck and secrets, what's beneath the belt and deep inside the heart; it's about the night. (qtd. in Alcorn 1992: 21-2)

Berlant and Freeman explain how this text and Queer Nation as a movement focus on the lack of safety for queers in both public and private spaces: "The national failure to secure justice for all citizens is experienced locally, in public spaces where physical gay-bashing takes place, and in even more intimate sites like the body" (1992: 201). They address the ways in which Queer Nation aims to assert visible public presence, rather than the right to a private status, which is the way sexuality is framed by dominant national discourses: "Visibility is critical if a safe public existence is to be forged for American gays, for whom the contemporary nation has no positive political value" (Berlant and Freeman 1992: 201). This requires "emphasis on safe spaces, secured for bodies by capital and everyday life practices" (Berlant and Freeman 1992: 201). Such visibility appears to challenge the normative regimes of social and political gentrification in neoliberal society.

The Impact of Gentrification

The correlation between AIDS and gentrification in New York City demonstrates the way homophobia and capitalism are bound up together as related dominant discourses and structures of power. Schulman asserts,

The high rate of deaths from AIDS was one of a number of determining factors in the rapid gentrification of key neighbourhoods of Manhattan...many of the gay men who died of AIDS...were either from the neighbourhood originally, and/or were risk-taking individuals living in oppositional subcultures, creating new ideas about sexuality, art, and social justice. They often paid a high financial price for being out of the closet and community oriented, and for pioneering new art ideas...The apartments they left were often at pregentrification rates, and were then subjected to dramatic increases or privatized. (2012: 37-38)

The assumption that gay men were the major proponents and instigators of gentrification is a myth produced by the erasure of counterpublic histories. As Rosemary Hennessy explains, “The increasing circulation of gay and lesbian images in consumer culture has the effect of consolidating an imaginary, class-specific gay subjectivity for both straight and gay audiences” (2000: 112). At the same time, however, the move to obscure the connections between sexuality and class results in foreclosing “consideration of the ways sexual identities are complicated by the priorities imposed by impoverishment, and keeps a queer political agenda from working collectively to address the needs of many whose historical situation is defined in terms of counter-dominant sexual practices” (Hennessy 2000: 141).

In discussing gentrification in New York in the last quarter of the 20th century, Christopher Mele argues that in the early 1980s, “the increase in the number of new corporate service positions was outmatched by the disappearance of semi-skilled jobs, creating a condition that drove parts of the city’s poor and minority labor force into an expanding formal and informal low-wage service economy” (2000: 222). As middle-class rental units disappeared, existing housing in low-income neighborhoods near the core of the city were targeted for “upgrading” (Mele 2000: 222). The redevelopment of neighborhoods around the East Village, the fast pace of “the speculative market,” and the “symbolic representation of the East Village as an alluring arts district, all increased the investment in East Village real estate (Mele 2000: 223).

By the end of the 1980s the East Village Art scene had largely disappeared (Mele 2000: 255-56). However, “popular resistance to the threat of bland, middle-class aesthetics, mixed art forms and antidevelopment politics together as a culture of protest” (Mele 2000: 257). Growing tensions in East Village about housing and use of space erupted in the late 1980s: “The squatters emerged as the unofficial leaders of an otherwise disconnected assortment of punks/skinheads,

anarchists, ex-hippies, artists, and other cultural radicals, who expressed a wide range of commitments to opposition to redevelopment and authority (Mele 2000: 262). Mele asserts that in the East Village, “The radical protests of the late 1980s were successful in reaffirming images of resistance to the East Village identity and thereby thwarting developers’ efforts to sell the working-class enclave as a desirable middle-class district” (2000: 279). The gentrification of the East Village was never wholesale like it was in Soho or on the West Side (Mele 2000: 279). Community resistance developed out of generations of disenfranchised residents who had mobilized through resistance and protest. This environment attracted “waves of middle-class subcultural or avant-garde movement” (Mele 2000: 283). Their presence also complicated local resistance to development either because of hostile relations with the original residents or because their presence made redevelopment attempts by the state and real estate industry easier (Mele 2000: 283).

The meaning of queerness in heteronormative culture also played a role in the dynamics of gentrification: “Media elevation of once marginalized and ‘hidden’ gay and drag subcultures has also implicated the East Village as a culturally radical site. Within the New York gay scene of the 1980s and early 1990s, nonconformity associated with the East Village served as cultural antipode to the West Village’s reputation, post-Stonewall, as white, middle-class, and accommodating to the mainstream ‘straight’ world” (Mele 2000: 287). Activist mobilization in response to the health crisis of AIDS, “contributed to the rise of a younger, more radical, inclusive, and vocal queer culture, much of it centered in East Village bars, clubs, coffee shops, and other meeting spaces” (Mele 2000: 287-88). An example was Wigstock, a yearly festival held at the end of the summer in Tompkins Square Park, which promoted the concept of an East Village gay identity. The mix of drag and performance art began to draw thousands.

In New York City in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, forms of gentrification including city planning practices, reflected repressive, homophobic policies. They were in many ways parallel to the AIDS epidemic in terms of their harmful impact on queer lives and the destruction of queer spaces and subcultures. As Berlant and Warner note, in 1995, New York City Council's Zoning Text Amendment forced adult businesses into non-residential zoning areas mostly at the waterfront (1998: 190-91). Those that didn't fit these regulations were required to close within a year, including all five "adult businesses on St Christopher Street" that were the "principal venues" where men met each other for sex (Berlant and Warner 1998: 191). Rosalyn Duetsche argues that "the conditions of gay public life" have been "endangered" in the 1990s (1999: 197). She cites the redevelopment of Times Square and the Hudson River piers as well as the harassment and closure of queer bars and dance clubs (Duetsche 1999: 197-98). Duetsche explains that "the zoning law restricts sex businesses to remote—frequently unusable—sites, makes them less visible by limiting the size, placement and illumination of signs, and isolates them by allowing no adult business within 500 feet of another" (1999: 197-98).

Berlant and Warner note that the only sites left for queers to meet in public are limited to online, virtual spaces, or small and inaccessible waterfront areas, both of which are remote and can be unsafe (1998: 191). Berlant and Warner conclude, looking forward in 1998, that "the result will be a sense of isolation and diminished expectations for queer life, as well as an attenuated capacity for political community" (Berlant and Warner 1998: 192). Significantly, "The nascent lesbian sexual culture, including the Clit Club and the only video-rental club catering to lesbians will also disappear. The impact of the sexual purification of New York will

fall unequally on those who already have the fewest publicly accessible resources” (Berlant and Warner 1998: 192).

Since the 1990s, queer culture has increasingly engaged with consumerism and commodity advertising to express visible queer identity and to gain a sense of belonging and inclusion within heteronormative society and institutions. One of the most direct examples is the explicit eagerness of queer organizations to cater to corporate interests as if this is the only way queers understand how to be visible and vocal in neoliberal society. It is almost as if AIDS activists’ powerful critiques of capitalism and homophobia never happened. What drives the collective willingness or desire of queers to wrap our identities and our culture in corporate affiliations and sponsorship? It often manifests as a lack of vision or imagination. Carrie Moyer, a member of Dyke Action Machine, a lesbian activist-group-turned-graphics-project, describes this process in the late 1990s:

We unquestioningly project ourselves onto each and every sexually-ambiguous or possibly gay-friendly advertising scenario that comes into our field of vision. We are ever straining to identify with the ad industry’s newly imposed representations of us. Because of this false public representation, we tend to be overly grateful when some mainstream company actually does advertise specifically to us... Since many gay people are geographically separated or driven away by their homophobic families... When a company actually “reaches out” to the gay or lesbian consumer, it can expect a certain amount of brand loyalty. (1997: 443, 445)

Moyer is suggesting that there is a particular vulnerability or precarity experienced by queers in neoliberal society that makes us want, or feel we need, to take on normative and assimilated visibility in order to get by or to thrive. These conditions Moyer articulates are intensified by gentrification as a material and social process.

Simultaneous to an increased investment in consumerism, by the 1990s a very visible fight for “queer rights” oriented itself to institutions and assimilation. Minoritarian experiences were not consulted or respected as sources of significant political agency and perspective, even

as experiences of marginality continued to pervade queer lives. The institutionalization of queer identity promoted the need for legal gay marriage, visible queer presence in the military, and an engagement with consumerism as an expression of queerness. As organizations lobbied for these “rights,” some blatant forms of homophobia grew more subtle, operating as homoantagonism instead.

In addressing the assimilation of queerness into heteronormative institutions, Roderick A. Ferguson considers the nature of power as productive. Drawing from Michel Foucault’s analysis in first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Ferguson explains that, “Power is not only that which says ‘no.’ For Foucault, power is also that which says: ‘Yes, tell me more. Yes, say that. Say that and say much more than that.’ Power is that which speaks in the affirmative” (2004: 170).

In the context of contemporary society and the gentrifying of culture and physical areas, queer spatial practices interface with positive aspects of power. This is especially the case when representations of queerness and queer equality in North American society are increasingly figured “as the subject of rights and institutional representation within the American nation-state” (Ferguson 2004: 174). The problem with this dynamic, as Ferguson sees it, is that when queerness “seeks to attain status as a modern and normative mode of difference,” it is also “the engine for a series of exclusions and alienations, particularly around class, gender, and race” (2004: 175). The institutionalization of queerness and its immersion in gentrified culture becomes “the site of an ethical struggle over who will reap the rights and benefits of normativity and who will incur the costs of non-normativity, a struggle that ties economic and institutional enfranchisement to how normative you are” (Ferguson 2004: 175). As Jon Binnie notes, “the increasing visibility and power of affluent white gay men has been accompanied by the

marginalization of the politics of both lesbian feminism and sex radicalism, and has highlighted the exclusions within queer communities on the basis of race, class, gender and disability” (2007: 34). According to Mark E. Casey, as heteronormativity begins to dominate the way queerness is made visible and categorized, particularly within urban settings like New York City, the result is an influx of consumerism into queer space, including: “the movement of the market into previously criminalized and stigmatized lives of lesbians and gay men” (2007: 126).

Lisa Duggan examines the development of these consumerist queer spaces. She identifies the ways in which subcultural queer spaces were originally significant instigators of queer visibility, identity, and community, as sites of counterpublic activities on the margins of explicitly heterosexual city centers (2002). In the 1990s, queer spaces were increasingly transformed into sites of consumption and gentrification where visibility is “limited to desirable and/or (hetero) normalized performances of a lesbian or gay identity,” a trend that Duggan calls “the new homonormativity” (Casey 2007: 127, Duggan 2002: 179). Duggan defines this term as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (2002: 179). What this means, as Casey puts it, is that “visibility and an ability to make claims to citizenship rights—once denied to lesbians and gay men, but now increasingly being extended outwards—are, nonetheless, limited to ‘non-threatening’ lesbians and gay men” (2007: 127). For example queer spaces such as bathhouses for lesbians or gay men, or parks and other public spaces where queers went to socialize and meet for sex, are increasingly being sanitized or removed, and those who used these spaces “become rendered invisible, unwanted, and/or criminal” (Casey 2007: 127).

David Bell and Jon Binnie argue that “the availability of forms of public space is contingent, meaning that aspects of queer culture are rendered invisible and are denied access to the same public space being claimed as a right by the newly empowered sexual citizens” (2004: 1811). This form of contingency overshadowing contemporary queer public space and the subtle forms of discrimination it manifests, produce a heightened sense of precariousness for queers. At the same time, heteronormative forms of queer visibility are available through institutionalization and assimilation accessed by participating as a queer consumer. These are spatialized forms and often intersect with gentrification. As Casey explains, “The ‘normalisation’ of the presence of certain types of sanitised and de-sexualised gay spaces within many urban landscapes is resulting in the large scale growth and visibility of gentrified ‘gay districts’....commercial lesbian and gay sites are increasingly important if a city is to be able to position itself as ‘cosmopolitan’ within the global city discourse” (2007: 129). These queer spaces, usually bars and clubs in gentrified areas, are “simultaneously commodified as asexual” or as sexual in heteronormative ways, and often exclusively catering to gay men (Casey 2007: 129-34).

Contemporary queer visibility has been increasingly defined, under the conditions of gentrified culture and its normative regimes, as a consumerist identity, emerging as both the subject and object of consumption. Instead of “authentic access to space and community,” queers become the object of spectacle and heterosexual voyeurism, which Ingram refers to as “a new and slightly more liberal ‘panopticon’” (1997: 50). Increasingly, straight presence and visibility, sometimes described as “allies,” occurs in queer spaces that were previously counterpublic formations. A visible expression of this dynamic are Pride Marches. As Casey points out, this straight presence “may not be a reflection of a growing heterosexual tolerance of ‘other sexualities’”. Rather, it may be the cost of lesbian and gay male visibility, reclaiming sites that

might have been temporarily queered as dominantly and/or naturally heterosexual” (2007: 126). In gentrified culture, straight intrusion into queer spaces is figured as progressive, in part because, as Ferguson notes, heteronormativity is framed as “the scene of order and rationality,” while “nonheteronormativity” is framed “as the scene of abandonment and dysfunction” (2005: 18). The result of this ideological binary, enforced through material and spatial practices, is that it creates racialized, classed and sexualized figures of disorder while also amplifying assimilated queer visibility (Ferguson 2005: 18).

Schulman notes that AIDS activism achieved effective change because it was informed and driven by values and concerns that were oppositional to gentrification and emerged from counterpublic experiences. During this historical period, queer sexual expression and pleasure were prioritized. Fighting back against heteronormative culture was understood as valuable and possible. Critiquing capitalism was experienced as a necessary part of queer liberation and resistance. There were many alternatives imagined and enacted for queer expression rather than buying into commodified markers of identity. These conditions in the 1980s and early 1990s are different from those of contemporary queer life. Gentrification has meant that most queer venues cannot afford the rent and they close down. Those venues that can sustain themselves, cater to an elite crowd. Most queers can no longer afford to live where our queer spaces used to be. Spaces to hang out on a regular basis where communities can develop are inaccessible or non-existent. While virtual space might have replaced this void in certain ways, it does not provide the same kind of social or intimate human contact. In political terms, gentrification has meant that there is a massive pressure to accept that the ways things are is just the way they are meant to be—a natural process of change (Schulman 2012: 33, 34, 52). In cultural terms, gentrification has meant homogenization and the fear of minoritarian difference (Schulman 2012: 28). And all of

these factors make it difficult to re-encounter and re-engage with the spirit and energy of AIDS activism, or with queer liberation and resistance movements more broadly. As Schulman writes, “Gentrification culture makes it very hard for people to intervene on behalf of others” because it is “rooted in the ideology that people needing help is a ‘private’ matter, that it is nobody’s business” (Schulman 2012: 71).

Queer Freedom and Queer Visibility

Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles are part of the first post-Stonewall generation of American artists and writers who explore the significance of freedom and visibility for queers and experiment with the meanings of these concepts. Freedom and visibility emerge as key thematic concerns that generate and surround the representations of queer spaces in the memoirs. The authors also critique attacks on freedom and visibility in queer spaces during the last quarter of the 20th century.

In the texts, queer freedom emerges as a relational connection with others as well as a possibility of mobility within queer spaces. Walking in the streets of New York is described by the narrators in all three memoirs as a basic freedom they cultivate. It is depicted as a queer spatial practice. They do not take this freedom for granted, and choose certain neighborhoods that are relatively safer from violence. This is part of their spatial practice. Rebecca Solnit points out that to walk out in public a person needs “free time, a place to go, and a body unhindered by illness or social restraints (2000: 168, 234). Having sought out and enacted these basic freedoms, which are shown to be threatened by homophobia, misogyny, and racism, the narrators in the three memoirs seek and defend other ways of being free.

For Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles, freedom means having the choice to dedicate their lives to their creative work. Freedom is also about having the choice to define their own identities, including their own sense of queerness, regardless of ideologies and dominant discourses. Wojnarowicz discovers his freedom through his experiences of the piers, Delany finds his freedom in encounters with men at the porn cinemas around 42nd Street and Times Square, and Myles locates her freedom in the private space of her apartment creating poetry, or in the public realm where she performs her poetry and participates in creative culture.

However, each author also has a different approach to the concept of freedom. Wojnarowicz is concerned with what to do with freedom (qtd. in Carr 2012: 153, 1991: 153, 261), Delany is concerned with what freedom means (1999: 194), and Myles is concerned with how to sustain her freedom (Myles 2010: 29, 75, 238).

The theme of visibility in the memoirs connotes the work of both seeing and being seen. It addresses how queers are visible to themselves as well as within North American society. Queer visibility also implies self-recognition as well as recognition by others, and the documentation of minoritarian experiences.

Looking back over the last quarter of the 20th century, Hennessy asserts that “Visibility in commodity culture is a limited victory” because queers are “visible as consumer subjects but not as social subjects” (2000: 112). Schulman reflects in her own memoir about this period, “The AIDS crisis made gay people visible” (2012: 115). In discussing how AIDS has transformed queer culture, Vaid states ten years into the crisis, that, “Visibility on its own is no longer enough” (1995: 202).

In their memoirs, Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles associate the visibility of minoritarian experiences of queerness with freedom. These representations are shown to be

resistant to heteronormative frameworks of meaning and value. At the same time, the memoirs also address how marginalized queer visibility leaves them vulnerable to violence, discrimination, and erasure.

Vaid has written that one of the costs of making queer counterpublic formations visible within American society is their subsequent repression. In each memoir, the authors understand that queer visibility depends upon public space or a public forum in which it can be represented. Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles, have found this space, often a contested and appropriated one, through writing and publishing their work. Wojnarowicz writes about resisting repression when his work is targeted during the era of the Culture Wars. Similarly, Delany addresses the ways he is labeled as nostalgic and his opinions are trivialized, because he opposes and critiques the destruction of queer spaces in New York City. In an interview in 2012, Myles expresses frustration at being locked out of mainstream publishing venues as a writer, even though she is also recognized as a major American poet and cultural figure by both counterpublic and mainstream audiences. In 2015, one of her earlier memoir novels, *Chelsea Girls* (1994), will finally be reissued by a larger, mainstream press, Ecco/HarperCollins (Personal Interview 2012). Though the dynamics of their struggles for visibility have changed as the three authors became more prominent and their work more widely read, there is still a constant battle for recognition in mainstream literary culture, in the academy, and in heteronormative culture more broadly.

Queer freedom and queer visibility are under siege, fought for, and celebrated in the memoirs. However, the concepts of “freedom” and “visibility” in the West do not always have counterpublic implications either in the 20th century or in the present.

In all three texts, the notion of freedom as it relates to queer space becomes the signifier for resistance to assimilation. Yet, as Ahmed observes, the meaning of “freedom” in the West is a contentious one: “It is no accident that in political rhetoric, freedom and fear are increasingly opposed: the new freedom is posited as the freedom from fear, and as the freedom to move. But which bodies are granted such freedom to move? And which bodies become read as the origin of fear and as threatening ‘our’ freedom?” (2004: 70-71). The memoirs by Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles examine the meaning of freedom in a counterpublic context by critically examining through experiences of queer space, the questions of who gets to make choices about being free, whose choices are limited, and why this is so.

When it comes to representations of queerness, Ahmed urges critical analysis of what queer visibility means. She explains: “We need to ask: How does defining a queer ideal rely on the existence of others who fail the ideal? Who can and cannot embody the queer ideal? Such an ideal is not always accessible to all, even all those who identify with the sign ‘queer’ or other ‘signs of non-normative sexuality’” (Ahmed 2004: 151). The notion of homonormative queer freedom in the West, intersects with histories and current conditions of racism, colonialism, and misogyny. This freedom also depends upon queer visibility that makes some experiences of queerness invisible or delegitimized.

The meaning of a queer counterpublic can also be productively contested. David L. Eng, Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz argue that some of the “canonical ideas of the field” of queer theory need to be critically rethought for the ways in which they are deployed in the context of neoliberalism (2005: 12-13). They point to the concept of “publics and counterpublics,” as one example, which stems from Jürgen Habermas’s theory of the bourgeois public sphere and liberal society during the Enlightenment period in the eighteenth-century.

They argue that queer theory needs to redefine this homogenous and exclusive model of the public sphere rather than naturalize it. Similarly, the notion of “an abstract citizen-subject who inhabits and moves with ease through civil society,” which is taken from Habermas and used in queer theory, needs to be problematized (Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz 2005: 12-13). As Nayan Shah points out, contemporary queer theorists often assume this citizen subject to be a “gay male subject” who moves from public to counterpublic, with “free access to participate in the public world of the intimate,” and has the choice to “retreat to a private realm of intimacy” (2005: 280). This representation is limited, and it has the effect of producing exclusion as well as erasure of minoritarian experiences. Shah argues that, “The class and race privileges of this undifferentiated subject do not anticipate any inequality or difference in the rapport, subjectivity, and opportunities for this male subject” (2005: 280). For Shah, Delany’s “queer ethnography” in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, is counter to the representation of the “undifferentiated subject” (2005: 280). He explains that Delany “situates inequality and interclass and interethnic contact at the center of his analysis of public sex and sexual publics. Delany valorizes cross-class contacts in public space that encompass a range of random, interclass, and interethnic social encounters in urban public spaces” (Shah 2005: 280).

The three memoirs represent queer spaces as contested spaces in terms of gender, race, and class, but they each approach these tensions differently. Wojnarowicz presents the queer space of the piers as a contested space due to its overuse and reckless use, which translate for him as false and destructive ways of expressing freedom. In Delany and Myles’s memoirs, queer space is a contested space in terms of gender and class, but they each approach this tension differently. As a queer who identifies as male and middle-class, Delany appropriates the experiences of women and poor men who are hustlers and often homeless. He tries to analyze the

contested queer space from their perspectives as he imagines or observes their experiences. Myles writes about the ways queer space, whether it is largely gay and male or feminist, is contested in terms of her own experiences as a woman from a working class background who is butch identified. By representing material and affective experiences of queer space as contested, the three authors address the ways access to freedom, visibility, and counterpublic practices within queer spaces are determined by larger structures of power and oppression.

Walking and Memory: Exploring Queer Spaces of the City and the Self

Each of narratives in the three texts presents journeys through the queer spaces of the city. The journeys are figured as parallel passages of personal inquiry and revelation for the narrators. These material and affective experiences are represented through descriptions of walking in the streets. As Solnit explains, “Walking returns the body to its original limits again, to something supple, sensitive, and vulnerable....Walking shares with making and working that crucial element of engagement of the body and the mind with the world, of knowing the world through the body and the body through the world” (Solnit 2000: 29).

The relational trope between exterior and interior journeys is one of the key features of this literary archive of queer spaces. For the narrators in each memoir, observing the city around them triggers memory. This is in keeping with Solnit’s argument that “Space is unequivocally linked with remembrance. Just as writing allows one to read the words of someone who is absent, so roads make it possible to trace the route of the absent. Roads are a record of those who have gone before, and to follow them is to follow people who are no longer there” (Solnit 2000: 72).

Myles, Delany, and Wojnarowicz each produce walking refrains in their texts, where movements on foot through the streets of New York become a queer spatial practice in their writing. Michel De Certeau explains that there is a strong connection between the act of walking and the act of writing: “Just as the speaker appropriates and takes on language,” walking is “*appropriation* of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian” (1984: 97-98). Queer spatial practices and constructs, such as the resurrection of abandoned space or the appropriation of heteronormative space for queer use can be understood as acts of enunciation in tension with spatial order—a creative reordering similar to writing. De Certeau points out that “if it is true that a spatial order organizes an ensemble of possibilities (e.g. by a place in which one can move) and interdictions (e.g., by a wall that prevents one from going further), then the walker actualizes some of these possibilities” and “invents others, since the crossing, drifting away, or improvisation of walking, privilege, transform or abandon spatial elements” (1984: 98). De Certeau also draws parallels between walking and writing itself. A walker will create “discreteness, whether by making choices among the signifiers of the spatial ‘language’ or by displacing them through the use” that is made of them (de Certeau 1984: 98-99). Certain places are ignored and others are created with “spatial ‘turns of phrase’ that are ‘rare,’ ‘accidental’ or ‘illegitimate’” (de Certeau 1984: 99).

There are further parallels to be found when the connection between walking and writing is examined in relation to the genre of memoir that all three authors use and subvert in their texts. Their memoir writing can be compared to walking the streets of New York. They choose their own paths through their memories. De Certeau’s comparison of how memories emerge in the psyche with how bodies moves through space also resonates with the qualities of narrative recollection in the texts. De Certeau describes these memories as: “Fragmentary and in-ward

turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state, symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body” (1984: 108). The authors also leave out certain details while including others, using their experimental forms to make space for queer counterpublic representations.

Representations of Queer Spaces in the Archive

The archive of queer space is constituted by representations of the streets, the Hudson River piers, the porn cinemas around Times Square and 42nd street, the bars or other event spaces where social gatherings and readings are held, and the poet’s apartment. I explore what characterizes these queer spaces and the central themes of freedom and visibility that generate them.

The queer spaces in the memoirs function as physical environments, relational practices and queer imaginaries that are recalled as sites of counterpublic experiences. Halberstam points out that counterpublics are spaces themselves, “created and altered by certain subcultures for their own uses” (2005: 186). In the memoirs, the queer spaces, as sites of counterpublic history, disrupt and challenge heteronormativity. They are in tension with processes of gentrification and they are associated with queer systems of economic exchange such as queer trade. The queer spaces are also a means by which to experience and justify an escape from what the narrators perceive as destructive or false systems and institutions.

Of the three authors, Wojnarowicz is most critical about the alternative economies of exchange in queer spaces. At the same time, he also makes clear in his poetic language and description that he is intrigued and drawn to the social interactions he has at the piers. Delany

makes the most explicit argument for the positive value of queer space whether it involves economic exchange or not. He argues that the porn cinemas serve the function of a complex and beneficial social institution for those who frequent them. Myles also celebrates and critiques the interactions she has in queer spaces, which she describes as helping her to become herself as a poet and a lesbian.

The narrators associate the queer spaces with experiences of agency. Each of the narrators chooses to be there. The spaces generate creative energy and inspiration. Wojnarowicz visits the piers to paint and to write. He characterizes the queer space as generative for his creative work, his queer identity, and his experiences of sex and sexuality. For Delany, the porn cinemas, and the social and sexual interactions with men he meets there, have a restorative effect. He visits them in the middle of each day as a break from his full-time work as a writer. For Myles, queer spaces are where she writes her poetry and where she performs it. They are a direct, creative source for her writing but they are also sites of conflict.

The representations of queer spaces are also associated with danger and the abject, as well as the strange and ambiguous. As Ingram, Bouthillette, and Retter point out, physical sites that may be conceived of as ugly or broken down are also considered meaningful due to commonalities of experience shared at these locations (1997: 13). Furthermore, queer spaces in the texts contain moments of illumination. Heightened expression yields new ethical material that is depicted as both sacred and profane in terms of the experiences that are generated.

Queer spaces are the sites of states of emergency in the memoirs. Experiences of crisis for the narrators are both personal and political, whether sudden and transformative or ongoing and ordinary. They often involve dwelling in an inhospitable present. For Wojnarowicz, living with AIDS in a homophobic culture is a state of emergency, as are his memories of being a

homeless queer youth. For Delany, the redevelopment of Times Square poses a state of emergency in his life as a middle-aged gay man. For Myles, living in a misogynistic culture is a state of emergency, as is her experience of alcoholism. The narrators each write about experiencing both exhilaration and fear in queer spaces, and choosing not to feel afraid. In some cases, queer spaces can also yield experiences of fear or threat which are part of the states of emergency the authors describe in their texts.

The queer spaces function as sites of memory, triggering reflective and traumatic remembrances for the narrators. Both literally and figuratively, the queer spaces are represented as permeable and porous. They can be used as containers, as shelters, and as sites of concentrated activity or experience, but they are never fully sealed. They open in order to let in the world outside. The openness of the queer spaces also allows for resistance and interventions in hostile environments which they are simultaneously immersed in and separate from. This permeability and porousness have the effect of making the queer spaces fleeting, temporary and anonymous, but not placeless. Their qualities of openness also make the queer spaces full of possibility, and they often function as sites of the unknown or the unexpected.

Queer spaces have specific kinds of relationships to time in the three memoir texts. They are represented as timeless, or spaces where time stops, or where inhabitants use time for their own purposes. Time can be appropriated in these spaces. The queer spaces also feature the accumulation of the past in the present. The authors each hold different perspectives about what the accumulation of the past means for queer space, whether it implies assemblage or wreckage. For all three authors, destruction lies in forgetting. The continued experiences of the past as it is sensed and felt in the present, are emphasized as generative and significant for the narrators.

Encounters with the past also yield situations of mourning and bearing witness to what has been lost.

There is an intense awareness and enactment of both spatial and temporal movement within the queer spaces in these texts. The queer bodies of the narrators are transient in the queer spaces they occupy. The narrative voices catch at these transitory spaces, and the memoirs form a queer archive through experiences of contingency and change. They document queer lives that are fleeting, and the spaces often reflect these ephemeral qualities. Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles represent queer spaces that are scavenged, precarious, covert, collapsing, fading, stolen away, and outside the law. Or they are doubled spaces, used for an official, heteronormative reason, and another, queer counterpublic reason, whether private or public. Also, qualities of anonymity or the possibility of danger produce experiences of queer spaces as temporary.

The representations of queer space are characterized by a fluidity between private and public environments. For queers of the authors' generation, signifying and interacting as queer often involved collectively stepping outside of private space into public space. In the memoirs, homophobia and poverty engender a public quality to private queer acts. Sex in public is shown to be an important element of queer subculture in the last quarter of the 20th century, though this was fundamentally altered by the emergence of the AIDS crisis. In particular, movement back and forth between private and public spaces is also an essential aspect of experiences of queer spaces in these texts.

One of the pervading qualities in these queer spaces is what Berlant calls the genre of the "impasse," which tracks "the sense of the present" (2011: 4). She describes it as "a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a

hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things, maintain one's sea legs, and coordinate the standard melodramatic crises with those processes that have not yet found their genre of event" (Berlant 2011: 4). I argue that the three texts are written in what Berlant conceives of as the ongoing present of impasse, addressing the affective dimension of experience in states of ordinary crisis. In the three memoirs, this crisis is in part triggered by the systems and structures of heteronormativity and late capitalism that permeate queer lives. The narrators move around in this impasse to the degree that they can, and contend with the crisis through strategies and acts of survival and sustenance. In the texts, the impasse as a genre also functions as a way of staging acts of resistance to oppressive conditions by holding on and observing the present as a form of distraction. As Berlant notes, "The holding pattern implied in 'impasse' suggests a temporary housing" (2011: 5).

Experiences of lacking a place are also an aspect of queer space in these memoirs. Sites for dwelling are rented, scavenged, or stumbled upon, and in most cases temporary. They are often fashioned out of imagined possibilities, with an eye for the future as a hope for something better. The texts represent the creation and formation of queer space within hostile realms, the appropriation of space for queer practices and existence, and the resurrection of abandoned space that apparatuses of power insist are not supposed to be used. These are shown to be queer acts of enunciation in tension with the dominant spatial order. Cruising as a practice that creates queer space could be understood in this way, as an organizing and opening up of queer possibilities within spatial constructs. When experiences of queer spaces are represented in the texts by Myles, Delany and Wojnarowicz, their writing also contributes to these queer spatial enunciations, actualizing the possibilities of these spaces through their memories.

In each of the texts, queer spaces provide the narrators with experiences of self-understanding or self-recognition. As such, the spaces are associated with pleasure and necessary shelter, and as forms of home, even if that home is, in some sense, placeless or temporary. As erotic sites the queer spaces in the memoirs are not fully known or understood—often represented through imagery of shadows or the play of light and darkness. The layouts of physical queer spaces allow for seeing and being seen, but also provide concealment. Queer spaces as erotic sites are consistently represented as offering experiences of choice.

The Significance of the Archive

The recent queer past that is witnessed in the memoirs by Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles continues to resonate in contemporary queer culture. The lives of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans people living in the present are fundamentally shaped by the trauma of AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s. During these two decades, queer people in large cities like New York saw their communities decimated. They lost lovers, life-partners, friends, colleagues, and neighbors. As a result, survivors carry the experience of the AIDS epidemic in their bodies and minds. They also carry an awareness and knowledge of the political, cultural, and economic conditions that allowed thousands of people to die. This trauma, as historical memory, textures the affective lives of survivors as well as younger generations of queers who have followed. It shapes how we currently experience being queer, how we express our queer identities, how we understand freedom, and the ways we make ourselves visible.

Just as the trauma of AIDS still haunts the present, so do the memories of AIDS activism and direct action that accompanied the epidemic and succeeded in saving queer lives. However, it is increasingly difficult to access and engage with these counterpublic practices, especially for

younger generations of queers who did not experience the AIDS activism and queer politics in the 1980s and 1990s. Forms of queer activism, pre-gentrification, that had previously worked to destabilize heteronormativity and capitalist structures, are harder to access because the sites of queer spaces that fostered them are far fewer.

Contemporary queer culture is immersed in gentrification. Social movements and creative work now happen within the social and physical processes that gentrification produces. This has also altered the visible and vocal representations of queer culture. The representations that get amplified frequently convey conservative political values. Meanwhile, queers are living under siege in a cultural context of dissonance and crisis ordinariness.

As the three memoirs explore, even with assimilated identities, but especially if uncompliant to assimilation, queers continue to live in states of emergency, or what Berlant calls “crisis ordinariness” (2011: 10). This is a state of witnessing, rendered by systematic trauma, of waiting to see what will happen next. Berlant argues that forms of systematic trauma, “are better described by a notion of systemic crisis or ‘crisis ordinariness’ and followed out with an eye to seeing how the affective impact takes form, becomes mediated” (2011: 10). She notes that “Crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what’s overwhelming” (Berlant 2011: 10). As they represent the dismantling of queer spaces, Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles document these states of emergency as “systemic crisis.” The narratives that witness the losses of queer space are counterpublic in terms of their critical perceptions about the effects of gentrification.

Radical Queer Negativity

In discussing radical queer negativity, Halberstam notes that “Queer or counterhegemonic modes of common sense lead to an association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices,

nonreproductive lifestyles, negativity, and critique” (2009: 89). It is through the expression of radical queer negativity that the three texts convey the materialization of recent queer history within the body and through spatial relations. This mode of expression also addresses the thematic concerns of freedom and visibility in relation to queer space.

Halberstam posits “a different form of negativity” found in the work of the writers and artists that are often excluded from the gay male archive. My notion of radical queer negativity is taken from Halberstam who describes it as a “suite of affectivities” that particularly emerge from political projects and social movements (2009: 110). They include “rage, rudeness, anger, spite, impatience, intensity, mania, sincerity, earnestness, overinvestment, incivility, brutal honesty, and disappointment” (Halberstam 2009: 110). My dissertation considers how Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles use this suite of affectivities to make counterpublic perceptions and minoritarian experiences visible. In using this expressive mode, the narrators also respond to the states of emergency in their lives, including the AIDS crisis and gentrification.

The expression of radical queer negativity in these three memoirs can also be understood as relational. As Muñoz argues, relationality “is not about simple positivity or affirmation. It is filled with all sorts of bad feelings, moments of silence and brittleness” (2009: 14). While the “antirelational thesis” of theorists such as Bersani and Edelman argues for an anti-relational approach to the future in return for endless circulation of pleasure, a letting go of forms, and rejection of reproduction, Muñoz critiques the erasure of difference in this approach: “The escape or denouncement of relationality” that is found in Bersani and Edelman’s work, registers “first and foremost” as “a distancing of queerness from what some theorists seem to think of as the contamination of race, gender, or other particularities that taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference” (2009: 11). At the same time, according to Muñoz, the

antirelational thesis is “deferring various dreams of difference” (2009: 11). To consider expressions of radical queer negativity that explore difference in relational ways can serve to expand the canon of queer negativity and acknowledge a larger range of minoritarian experiences of queerness.

Halberstam draws some distinctions between the traditional canon of queer negativity on one hand, and expressions of radical queer negativity that I am arguing are found in the work of Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles. Traditional queer negativity is “a camp archive, a repertoire of formalized and often formulaic responses to the banality of straight culture and the repetitiveness and unimaginativeness of heteronormativity” (Halberstam 2009: 110). Radical queer negativity, on the other hand, “is far more in keeping with the undisciplined kinds of responses that Leo Bersani at least seems to associate with sex and queer culture, and it is here that the promise of self-shattering, loss of mastery and meaning, unregulated speech and desire are unloosed” (Halberstam 2009: 110; Bersani 2010). Halberstam concludes that “We must be willing to turn away from the comfort zone of polite exchange in order to embrace a truly political negativity” (2009: 110).

Failure and capitalism are intertwined according to the critical perceptions of radical queer negativity. As such, failure can be a way to critique capitalism and gentrification by revealing that “alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities” (Halberstam 2009: 88). In this context, failure presents openings rather than a void. Ahmed understands failure to be an assertion of political and ethical alternatives to normative systems of heterosexuality and capitalism: “Do queer moments happen when this failure to reproduce norms as a form of life is embraced or affirmed as a political and ethical alternative?”

Such affirmation would not be about the conversion of shame into pride, but the enjoyment of the negativity of shame, an enjoyment of that which has been designated shameful by normative culture” (Ahmed 2004: 146). While failure is accompanied by pain, such as “disappointment, disillusionment, and despair,” these “negative affects” can be used to oppose the notions of “positivity” or “positive thinking” that obscure larger oppressive structures. Negativity becomes a way to intervene in the disciplining strategy of neoliberalism that tries to replace critique and activism with regimes of personal responsibility and beliefs in North American exceptionalism (Halberstam 2009: 3; Ehrenreich 2009: 13, 8).

Failure is also what produces queer space, because when queers embrace their own failure to achieve or to match heteronormative expectations and performances of identity, they resist assimilation and create queer space through difference. An abandoned, forgotten, or covertly public space, such the Hudson River Piers in Wojnarowicz’s text, or the porn cinemas around Times Square in Delany’s text, are appropriated as queer spaces in these memoirs. Similarly, in Myles’s text, she explains, “In a way, poetry really does require failure, because failure produces space. That nobody else wants. Poets as a group hate success” (2010: 56).

Creaturely Life

The concept of creatureliness as it is interpreted by Santner in Benjamin’s work, first emerged in German-Jewish philosophy and literature during the 20th century (Santner 2006: xix). Santner cites its development in the writing of Rainer Maria Rilke, Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, and Giorgio Agamben (2006: xix). However, in my project I am interested in how the constellation of ideas emerging from the notion of the creaturely resonate in the thematic concerns of freedom and visibility found in the memoirs by Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles.

The creaturely can be linked with radical queer negativity in terms of the way it dwells in melancholy and is attentive to experiences of states of exception. It is also a stance of exception and refusal to go on without a relational change, which manifests as a political and ethical intervention in the present. This possibility of queer intervention in normative quotidian life, and its reanimation by the artist and witness, are also characteristics of the creaturely.

According to Santner, for Benjamin, melancholy was “an immersion in the realm of creaturely life” (2006: xix). Santner asks what the relation is between melancholy and redemption, insofar as “melancholy shows itself to be both resource and impasse, enabling and disabling, in the world of historical analysis and action at issue for Benjamin” (2006: xix). The creaturely as it is represented in the memoirs depicts the narrators’ experiences of both melancholy and redemption. Their melancholic perspectives, as immersion in the creaturely realm, provide both resource and impasse. They experience this condition as being both enabling and disabling, especially in the context of gentrification and the AIDS crisis.

Representations of creatureliness in the texts are shown as enactments of resistance to heteronormative forms of progression. At the same time, these representations also lean towards new queer spatial practices and imaginaries. They consider the reparative possibilities of queer futurities.

As Santner explains, the creaturely signifies “less a dimension that traverses the boundaries of human and nonhuman forms of life than a specifically human way of finding oneself caught in the midst of antagonism in and of the political field” (2006: xix). I argue that experiences “of finding oneself caught in the midst of antagonism in and of the political field” are shown to be a major predicament of queer life in the memoirs, particularly in instances of

navigating and resisting assimilation. The creaturely emerges as an expressive mode when the narrators desire visibility or freedom and work towards achieving these desires.

I also consider the literal and figurative notion of a creaturely stance in the memoirs in relation to Berlant's concept of "gestural economies" (2011: 5). Berlant describes how these gestural economies are strategies of survival and potential resistance, which she calls "norms of self-management that differ according to what kinds of confidence people have enjoyed about the entitlements of their social location" (2011: 5). The creaturely stance and its gestural economies are a means of coping with the present and its states of emergency. As Berlant describes: "The way the body slows down what's going down helps to clarify the relation of living on to ongoing crisis and loss" (Berlant 2011: 5). This is also a crucial quality of the first-person accounts of creating, defending, and mourning the loss of queer spaces that I have identified in the memoirs.

The creaturely is reflected in the way the narrators of the memoirs contend with the states of emergency in which they find themselves. It is both a form of witnessing and a form of action. As Santner notes, a central question addressed by the concept of the creaturely is, "the relation between the knowledge produced by the melancholy gaze on human affairs, on the one hand, and the realm of action and practice—the ethical and political intervention in history—on the other" (2006: xix).

The creaturely stance, the literal position of queer bodies described in these texts in acts of intimacy, creation, and emotive expression, becomes a mode and method of resistance to the limitations and attacks on freedom and visibility experienced by queers in these memoirs. The concept of the creaturely, "opens a new way of understanding how human bodies and psyches register the 'states of exception' that punctuate the 'normal' run of social and political life"

(Santner 2006: xix). This registering impacts the physical and metaphorical state of the creaturely self, including the bodily self. It conveys the materialization of recent queer history as experiences of ordinary crisis. Creaturely life, as the registering of these states of exception, produces a leaning or slanted position which metaphorically becomes a queer stance. It is a material experience felt within the body and through spatial relations. In the memoirs the creaturely, as an expressive mode, provides the potential for freedom through self-realization as well as through sensations of creative, critical, and sexual agency. It is a refusal to go on without a relational change. As Santner explains, Benjamin's theory of creaturely existence is about "life captured at the (ever shifting and mutating) threshold of the juridicopolitical order" (2006: 86). The experience of creaturely existence "places the subject in relation to the state of emergency running through the fabric of everyday life" (Santner 2006: 86).

In Benjamin's conceptualization, a creaturely stance involves a bent posture in its melancholic attentiveness to the ground's spectral ruins at our feet (Santner 2006: 86). In the context of the three memoirs by Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles, this attentiveness is also directed towards the bodily and the profane. A creaturely stance, as Santner articulates it, involves a "cringe that bends the back of the creature" who is "that figure of pure exposure to the state of exception immanent to law" (2006: 86). I theorize this descriptive stance of both leaning and resistance as a distinctly queer experience in the three memoirs. It is a relinquishing and also a refusal. It becomes a form of struggle and a contended experience that also signifies agency. In the memoir texts, the creaturely stance literally emerges through leaning, turning, pivoting, and curved acts, which are postures associated with the narrators and the creaturely practices they engage in. Myles also associates creaturely work with a pulsing or pumping that transforms internal experience into external expression. Frequently, the stance of the queer narrator in these

texts is creatively contorted and relational. The queer body can be theorized in its counterpublic possibilities to take the position of leaning or standing slant as an exception to heteronormative rule, and in resistance to the disciplining systems that repress, shape, and yield profit and reproduction in the context of capitalism.

In the memoirs, the queer stance of intervention, or the state of impasse experienced as a heteronormative failure, can be understood to produce the alternative or the extra in the heteronormative quotidian. This is how forms of reanimation occur in the minoritarian experiences and perceptions found in the texts. Benjamin's argument, as Santner points out, is that "this work of reanimation can take place only based on and as a fundamental political decision and act; there can be no neutral place from which such work intervenes into the past. That is the central point of Benjamin's notion of *Jetztzeit*—the present situation of danger and crisis—in his famous theses "On the Concept of History" (2006: 62). In the memoirs, this act of reanimation, as the counterpublic and liberating potential of queer experience, is consistently generated within queer space. When queer spaces are dismantled, it is harder to access and enact this work of reanimation.

Chapter Three: *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* by David Wojnarowicz

A Record of Survival

David Wojnarowicz is an American writer and visual artist who died of AIDS-related causes in 1992 at the age of 38. In my study of Wojnarowicz's work, I focus on *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (1991), which was published a year before his death. I also refer to material in his diaries published as a selected collection, *In the Shadow of the American Dream* (1999), because some of the entries are included either in identical or revised versions in *Close to the Knives*.

Like Delany and Myles's texts, Wojnarowicz's memoir deals with queer spaces situated in historical moments both pre-AIDS and in the midst of the AIDS crisis. He also writes about pre-AIDS spaces in retrospective terms. His use of first-person narration reveals the states of emergency in which the narrator dwells, first as a queer homeless youth in New York City, and later as a queer adult witnessing the AIDS epidemic in America. The tone, style, and language of the narrative voice produce an intense awareness and enactment of both spatial and temporal movement that are perpetuated by the fleeting nature of the queer spaces the narrator experiences. In this chapter, I discuss queer spaces in Wojnarowicz's text where private and public merge, particularly the streets and the Hudson River piers during the 1980s and early 1990s.

Wojnarowicz compiled *Close to the Knives* in the final years of his life when he knew that he was living with AIDS. The text includes selections from a decade of his writing. It forms a collection that is non-linear, fragmented, imagistic and multi-textual. It is also meant to be

performed so that the narrator, consistently identified as the author, can be witnessed in his own bearing witness to the world.

In Wojnarowicz's writing about queer spaces where AIDS is present, he asserts that the bodies and selves experiencing the illness are political spaces. When he addresses his own illness or the illness of his lovers or friends, his writing exhibits similarities with Eve Sedgwick's description of her friend Michael's response to his illness: "It's as though there was transformative work to be done just by being available to be identified within the very grain of one's illness (which is to say, the grain of one's own intellectual, emotional, bodily self as refracted through illness and as resistant to it), being available for identification to friends, but as well to people who don't love one; even to people who may not like one at all or wish one well" (1993: 261).

Like Delany and Myles, Wojnarowicz explores what Doyle notes in his paintings as "the historical dimensions of experience" (2013: 146). Similarly, both his visual and written work are engaged with the material nature of history, which I read in terms of queer spatial histories. This engagement is also the means he uses to make his private experience public. As Doyle observes of Wojnarowicz's visual art, it "addresses the political and historical dimension of our personal selves; it also expands the sphere of the intimate. It isn't moving because it is about hard things but rather because it makes us feel history moving through us, and *that* is hard" (2013: 146).

Wojnarowicz explains how the experience of being an outsider has offered him the imperative to engage history through the queer spaces he inhabits, whether geographically, temporally, bodily, or politically: "Each painting, film, sculpture or page of writing I make represents to me a particular moment in the history of my body on this planet, in America"

(1991: 149). This awareness of the revelatory aspects of a minoritarian perspective is also shared by Delany and Myles.

In Wojnarowicz's life time, there was little language available to address the collective experiences of at-risk and homeless queer youth. Language that addressed the experiences of queer people living with AIDS was only emerging. His writing bears witness to the relations between the experiences of these two kinds of states of emergency.

Though the memoir appears to be written in the genre of literary non-fiction, it does not focus on what we accept about reality but what we cannot accept. It aims to be authentic through a vivid focus on both materiality and imagination. As Dodie Bellamy articulates, Wojnarowicz "forces us to slow down, way down, until perception fractures. Bodies become intensely eroticized....animate and inanimate, inside and outside blur" (2006: 79).

In an interview Wojnarowicz discusses his fusion of imagination and fictional narratives with non-fictional, autobiographical accounts, and he highlights the importance of personal experience: "I realize that the only thing I like to write about is what I experience. The stories I wrote of other people were really things that just touched on what I felt about the world, or what I experienced in the world....They become like symbols of what I experienced that I couldn't express" (Interview 1991: 170).

Living and Writing in "Picturesque Ruins"

The queer spaces in Wojnarowicz's writing can also be examined through the shifts in their dimensions brought about by AIDS activism in New York City. Beginning in the mid-eighties and lasting until the early nineties, this trajectory of political action, often direct and grassroots,

altered queer visibility and queer imaginaries of what was possible. Activism and queer visibility in the wider culture and in the media influenced how Wojnarowicz wrote about queer space.

New York City, especially in the East Village, the Lower East Side, and the Hudson River piers, was the central environment in which Wojnarowicz wrote about queer spaces from the late seventies until in his death in 1992. Carr points out that, “David was a major figure in what is now a lost world, in part because he happened to come along when New York City was as raw as he was” (2012: 3). Wojnarowicz found elements in the cityscape that resonated with him creatively and personally. They allowed him certain kinds of freedom to be queer and to create and explore different queer spaces. As Carr explains, this environment wasn’t yet controlled by state or self-surveillance and policing, nor the forces of privatization and gentrification. This may have been one reason Wojnarowicz found aesthetic beauty or power in what was deteriorating, broken, and sometimes dangerous. He called this environment, which doubled as queer space, “picturesque ruins” (qtd. in Carr 2012: 3), carefully documenting and recreating it in his writing.

Born in 1954, in Red Bank, New Jersey, Wojnarowicz and his siblings spent their childhood moving from town to town and dealing with a violently abusive father they had been left with by their mother (Carr 2012: 7-23). Wojnarowicz ran away with his siblings to live with his mother in a one-room apartment near Times Square by the mid-1960s (Carr 2012: 24-29). After living on the street as an adolescent, and backpacking across the country and in Europe, including stints in San Francisco and Paris, Wojnarowicz moved to the East Village in October of 1980, where he lived the rest of his life (Carr 2012: 37-145, 163).

The cultural scene he found there was steeped in a brief but intense anti-movement known as “no wave,” directly produced by the cityscape into which it was born. In the seventies,

punk and new wave had generated no wave, an experimental aesthetic mode of expression and style that included music, super-8 film, video, and performance art. These were strong influences on Wojnarowicz's early work. The loose, fluid, unfettered physicality of the city space is also something Wojnarowicz's writing is attuned to.

Wojnarowicz moved seamlessly between written and visual mediums. His earliest written work was poetry, and his earliest visual forms were stencil and graffiti art, as well as photography. In these creative practices he was self-taught, as he was in all the art forms he worked with, sustained in part by the DIY culture of the time.

In the early part of Wojnarowicz's career as an artist, he was already known for the way he took up both private and public spaces in startling ways. The guerrilla-art gestures in Wojnarowicz's work, especially in the early years, are what gained him attention from the East Village scene. He was contributing to an artistic movement, along with artists like Jean-Michael Basquiat and Keith Haring, which used visual imagery to interact with the streetscape. Reflecting retrospectively in 1990 on his early stenciling, Wojnarowicz notes that, "At the time I thought it was a great rude thing and I never counted on showing in the art world. I didn't think my world was developed enough. I felt, with my lack of education, that wasn't something that was possible" (qtd. in Carr 2012: 176).

Wojnarowicz's early innovations and development came from the way he channeled expressionism through his own experience, and combined it with conceptual notions that had a broader frame of reference than what could be found in the Downtown scene. While expressionism was a mode he had found through the personal rawness of his writing and visual work, in his early journals there is a quiet, reflective, philosophical quality to his observations

and musings. They are quite different from the chaotic, gritty, gestures and representations soaked in irony and occasional nihilism that were produced in the Downtown scene.

Carr notes that he was drawn to the Beat tradition but wasn't interested in punk, except for the work of Patti Smith whose own aesthetic was shaped by poetry (2012: 84). The poetic language Wojnarowicz uses is heavily influenced by the Beats and Ginsberg's *Howl*. In particular he incorporates the stylistic first-person narration found in literature of the Beats. This narrative perspective conjures solitude even as it appears engaged in the exterior surroundings it describes. In Wojnarowicz's writing, the queer narrator occupies the action as both teller and protagonist. He is rendered in hyper-vivid terms, as primary witness at the centre of his own experience.

Arthur Rimbaud was another key literary influence on Wojnarowicz's work. Qualities of the ecstatic and the grotesque in Rimbaud's *Illuminations* (1886), detailing life on earth and its ending, must have seemed particularly potent to Wojnarowicz in the queer spaces he created and inhabited pre-AIDs and during the AIDS crisis.

The genre of Wojnarowicz's essays is neither fiction nor non-fiction. His language depends on strong imagery to convey the mood of the experiences described in each narrative. The monologue form, which Wojnarowicz uses exclusively in this text, had been popularized in the late 1970s by Eric Bogosian and Spalding Gray, and then by Karen Finley in the mid-1980s (Taylor 2006: 114). Just as for Delany and Myles, it is a major influence on Wojnarowicz.

Richard Maguire asserts that from the beginning of Wojnarowicz's career, he "chooses the details which will go towards his self-restoration; but unlike other autobiographers who search for the truth Wojnarowicz is acutely aware that he is creating a mask, that he is caught up in the process of *prosopopoeia*" (2010: 259). Wojnarowicz's struggle with how much he could

reveal of himself to others grew more intense as an adolescent when he began leading “a double life” (Carr 2012: 40). Based on his retrospective writing about hustling as a young teenager, it seems these early sexual experiences were a way to make money, to find an intimacy and comfort that he didn’t receive from his family, and also to explore his own sexuality. The danger in hustling is a tension that he articulated in his journal: “The fine line between a fella out for a good time or a knife wielding lunatic” (Wojnarowicz, Fales Series 3A, 4.12.25). Wojnarowicz metaphorically wore a mask because he presented parts of himself he knew customers wanted. He performed a role and had to keep parts of himself hidden from some of the men who paid him for sex. He writes about feeling objectified as a hustler and his sense of psychological fragmentation as both subject and object. On the other hand, this kind of work introduced him to a queer space where he could sometimes desire and be desired.

The difference between the experience of hustling and cruising is clarified in the first two narratives at the beginning of *Close to the Knives*. In the first one, he describes feeling forced, as a hustler and a homeless kid, to have sex with any customer who hired him: “hustling for some red-eyed bastard with a pink face and a wallet full of singles to come up behind me and pinch my ass murmuring something about good times” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 6). At the piers, where he goes to cruise as an adult with a home to return to, he has more active agency and can choose to say no to sexual advances. When someone grabs him in the dark, the narrator, “turned toward the dark void where the face should be, stepping back as I did so....I put my hand to his shoulder and said, ‘Sorry...just walking around....’ (Wojnarowicz 1991: 19).

Unflinching Glances: The Private as Public

The qualities with which Wojnarowicz invests queer space render them erotic, ordinary, open and vast, enclosed and minute, fleeting, deteriorating, gritty, tentative, transitory, elegiac, pornographic, romantic, animalistic or creaturely, contemplative, dangerous, grotesque, fantastical, and life-sustaining. These qualities are woven into the ways he imagines and creates queer space, and its dimensions of pleasure and intimacy as well as violence.

Public and private spaces in Wojnarowicz's text figure independently of each other but they rarely retain their separateness. This has a lot to do with his notion of visibility as the creative and political necessity of both seeing and being seen. The lack of separateness between private and public queer space is also due to the nature of his queer culture. Cruising, for example, depended on the movement between public and private, as did AIDS activism based on one's self-identity or illness.

In Wojnarowicz's writing, homophobia and poverty make private queer acts public. The text conveys how the internalization, intimidation, and threat of homophobia can make queer people can feel isolated in private moments but also under surveillance and self-policed. Second, the text shows that in a capitalist context, physically private queer space is rarely free and therefore often inaccessible or at risk because it is largely unaffordable or fragile. Third, the text describes how his queer culture uses public spaces for intimate exchanges if private queer spaces are not available.

The interior queer space of the mind is repeatedly represented throughout the text as a source of strength, as protection, as life-sustaining, and also as equally vivid to the narrator's physical reality. One reason for this is the use of first-person narration, which gives prominence to interior thoughts, feelings, and emotions, as well as sensory experience. If the interior space of

the mind is associated with negative experience, including suffering, this is shown to be produced by outside forces such as homophobia or poverty and is not inherent to the narrator's internal world. The narrator makes consistent references to dwelling in the enclosure of his own mind and imagination where he can be himself and therefore be queer, celebrating and guarding his difference.

Wojnarowicz chooses the circular and circling (in process) form as a means to tell his story and express experiences of recollection. He refers to the movement of his memories as "a revolving screen that mixes past and present" (Wojnarowicz 1991: 104). In his remembering, "the billion or more fragments of my living and my life lift up around me in a windswell, and through that swirling wall of snow-like images I reach way back" (Wojnarowicz 1991: 274). Recalling a moment of intense physical and emotional sensation during sex, the narrator emphasizes this circling again. He describes "using the centrifugal motion of spinning and spinning and spinning to achieve that weightlessness where polar gravity no longer exists," with "all the whirl of daily life and civilization spiraling like a noisy funnel into my left ear" (Wojnarowicz 1991: 56-57).

Just as in Delany and Myles's memoirs, there is intense awareness and enactment of both spatial and temporal movement in Wojnarowicz's work. In particular, for Wojnarowicz, this spatial and temporal movement is perpetuated by the fleeting nature of the various queer spaces the narrator inhabits. This movement is also generated by the sense of an overwhelming need to disengage from the various destructive or false relations, systems and institutions into which he understands people's lives are embedded and interpolated. Queer spaces, especially those that situate and contain moments of visibility, revelation, eroticism, and risk, are the means by which he attempts to experience, and justify his escape. These experiences allow him to live "close to

the knives,” in contested proximity to freedom. Together, memories and visionary qualities serve to fragment the spatial reality of queer spaces, creating a sense of simultaneity or a collage of moments. Temporal movement within queer space forms a mosaic out of the narratives. Realities and fantasies of queer space are juxtaposed. Wojnarowicz explains that what he creates are “fragmented mirrors of what I perceive to be the world” (1991: 157).

In his memoir, experiences of trauma also interact with the queer spaces, not as a product of them, but as a part of their shaping. Physical, sexual, and emotional traumas haunt the present tense of the text as well as its future, and they have a major impact on the temporal movements of the narratives. Difficult, painful memories reoccur and interact, forming new relations and new significances, especially in terms of the narrator’s critique and response to the way homophobia functions in his life as a gay man in America.

The movement of expression in Wojnarowicz’s writing is generated by first-person narration that is heightened by tensions of pleasure, danger, or pain, as well as a conscious witnessing of phenomena occurring around him or to him. Though the scenarios are sometimes fantastical or hallucinatory, they are never simply escapist. The visceral, graphic tendencies of his writing, manifested by a collision between fantasy and reality, involve a critical gaze. They undermine what is considered “real” in Wojnarowicz’s America. His text aims to show and explore how this particular “real” is invented and policed. Just as in Delany and Myles texts, Wojnarowicz’s writing exposes, represents, and makes visible the narrator’s own personal, oppositional reality in the face of this policing.

The narrative trajectory follows a structure and rhythm of unflinching focus before shattering the image abruptly or quietly pulling away into stillness and silence. The image is left to haunt, as if it is superimposed over what happens next, like a memory. For Wojnarowicz, this

kind of movement—a camera’s glance, the image made visible, a heightened risk, and then, most often, a leave-taking, is the way in which queer spaces can be created and witnessed in his America. In his image-driven writing, this approach manifests aesthetically with photographic qualities, montage, or cinematic qualities of seeing and being seen in fleeting and sometimes contradictory ways.

There is a sense of physicality in Wojnarowicz’s narratives, combined with an attention to orality, which indicate their performative potential. Tony Kushner figures these narratives as a form of public discourse that is performed in public space. He argues Wojnarowicz consistently inhabited public spaces in different ways. For one thing, in the early part of his life, Wojnarowicz “lived...his life on the street, which is to say in public, which is also to say before the public, in view” (Kushner 1996: xii). It is important to note that this kind of exposure to the public, and the access the public has to one’s private life, is often a queer experience. Kushner argues that, “All public discourse is theatrical, in the sense that in all public speech, in all public record and debate, there is an active generative tension between partisan power posturing, between strategically designed effect, and the truth as one knows it....To exist in public demands performance” (1996: xiii). The ability to perform emerges from the act of remembrance in Wojnarowicz’s memoir. Through performance he recovers memories, some pleasurable, and others traumatic, that need to be survived.

“Like a heart against a rib cage”: What to Do with Queer Freedom

In 1980, when Wojnarowicz got a job at the Danceteria, he expressed dislike for the “punk new wave” atmosphere of the club. According to Carr, “His duties included keeping bartenders supplied with iced Heineken or Bud, carrying broken sacks of ice between floors, emptying

garbage cans, pulling bottles or whole rolls of paper towels from toilets, mopping up vomit, diving ‘through human walls of sweating pounding thrusting dancing bodies to sweep up broken bottles’” (1991: 153). In a letter to a friend in France he complained, “Fou! The punk new wave people are becoming very boring to me.... [They] destroy anything they desire, break chairs, doors, light fixtures. I have to clean up after them....These people have no imagination concerning what to do with freedom” (qtd. in Carr 2012: 153). Just over ten years later, and facing death, Wojnarowicz writes about his sense of the existing limits on freedom both for himself and for American society:

With all these occurrences of death facing me, I thought about issues of freedom. If government projects the idea that we, as people inhabiting this particular land mass, have freedom, then for the rest of our lives we will go out and find what appear to be the boundaries and smack against them like a heart against a rib cage. If we reveal boundaries in the course of our movements, then we will expose the inherent lie in the use of the word: freedom. (Wojnarowicz 1991: 261)

For Wojnarowicz, freedom is only a “word” and “a lie” (1991: 261). But there is hope to be found in pursuing freedom because it is a critical act. To try to enact one’s freedom becomes a means to reveal the ways in which the American people are not free. This is an action that has personal and political consequences. Wojnarowicz associates the pursuit of freedom with the organ that allows any animal, including humans, to live. He compares it metaphorically to “a heart against a rib cage” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 261).

In Wojnarowicz’s memoir, his focus on freedom is about what to do with it.

Wojnarowicz engages in “living close to the knives” in order to bear witness through counterpublic perceptions. It is the only possible way he can survive and yet still engage with the world in which he lives. Living close to the knives is how he chooses to experience freedom and to work towards social and political change. As a spatial metaphor of proximity, including proximity to danger, the phrase “living close to the knives” emphasizes the shifting movement

between private and public queer spaces. This phrase could also be interpreted as a reference to his sense of close temporal proximity to past, present, or future. In this context, “knives” would metaphorically represent his past experiences of violence in childhood and youth, or his current fight against the homophobia of political and religious leaders, or a future ending such as death.

In Wojnarowicz’s text, queer spaces often seem to emerge out of a struggle to escape. Over the course of the memoir’s narrative, escape comes to mean freedom for Wojnarowicz. The narrative voice explains in various ways that escape is about being able to come apart from relations, systems, and institutions that he experiences as false and destructive. However, this escape as “disintegration,” which he refers to in the title of his memoir, is not represented as disengagement. Rather, it is critical bearing witness to the minute particularities of the space and time in which Wojnarowicz lived, as well as to history on a massive scale that he defines as human civilization and its trajectory. Through a queer subjectivity, the act of witnessing in his text also involves an implicit need to articulate what is seen and experienced. The struggle to escape therefore involves both bearing witness to queer spaces as well as fighting against their enforced invisibility and destruction.

In Wojnarowicz’s memoir, especially in the narratives of recollection about his youth, experiences of freedom can lead to danger. He remembers his past through fact and fiction. As such, he mixes place and situation in order to create a whole narrative out of a series of events that are incomplete because of trauma.

In one narrative he retrospectively revises his memories of an experience of danger. His journal entry from the second half of 1980 contains a situation of violence at the piers. He hears “a series of high-pitched hysterical screams and in all of that gathered darkness a figure of light flew out, speed motions of arms and legs pumping, propelling it towards the far wall, blur lines

of movement” (Wojnarowicz 1999: 169). The “kid” who has run out addresses the “guys” who come forward: “There’s a guy in there with a knife. He cut me, he said, turning his head to the side, exposing a long red wound” (Wojnarowicz 1999: 170). Wojnarowicz responds by going to look for the man to “bash the guy’s head if he came running out” (1999:170). In the narrative from *Close to Knives*, in a section he labels “Journal Entry,” Wojnarowicz uses the opening from the original journal entry almost word for word to describe the queer space of the piers (1991:187). However, he concludes the section in the memoir by leaving out the violent scenario. He replaces it with a description of being drugged by another man during a sexual encounter. In this passage he responds first with fear and then changes his mind: “A quiet claustrophobia entered my body beneath my skin, mixing with the bloodstream to form a sense of fear, not grounded, not severe, but more like a passing notion of vulnerability, wondering at his hands as they reach out of the darkness and slide warmly beneath my neck, over the sides of my neck, palms across my cheeks, then over my eyes” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 188). The relinquishing of control and the hovering between real fear and pleasure is what this experience is represented to be for the narrator: “Thinking at that moment of him as a murderer, then slowly falling deep inside pleasure sensations....I realized it was just the stranger in him that I was feeling cautious about” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 188).

It is significant that Wojnarowicz omits the act of violence from a narrative about his past experience at the piers. This suggests that he remembers choosing not to feel afraid and instead encounters a form of pleasure that is like the freedom of “falling”. His choice not to be afraid is also supported by his description of a situation in which his expectation of violence proved false. The actual presence of violence in his experience is then obscured by his revision of his memory. He has chosen to imagine an escape from fear as a form of freedom, despite the fact that he knew

fear well. Many entries in his journal suggest that as a homeless or poor queer youth, he lived with an intense and even traumatic fear of violence that was based on his personal experiences as well as the experiences of his friends.

“In order not to disappear”: The Necessity of Queer Visibility

The narrative, “Postcards from America,” affirms queer visibility in the streets as necessary for AIDS activism. Visibility is used to combat the homophobia that allowed AIDS to become an epidemic. Wojnarowicz first drafted this passage in his journal in 1988 (1999: 205-06). He argues that “to turn our private grief for the loss of friends, family, lovers and strangers into something public would serve as another powerful dismantling tool. It would dispel the notion that this virus has a sexual orientation or a moral code. It would nullify the belief that the government and medical community has done very much to ease the spread or advancement of the disease” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 121).

Memorials for the dead were a way to make private queer space public during the AIDS crisis. Wojnarowicz calls memorials a “ritual” to “make private grief public” (1991: 121). Yet he is angered by the lack of impact this public ritual seems to have, as though it is another example of the way in which queer lives are perceived as expendable in his society (Wojnarowicz 1991:122). He expresses the worry that, “friends will slowly become professional pallbearers, waiting for each death, of their lovers, friends and neighbours, and polishing their funeral speeches; perfecting their rituals of death rather than a relatively simple ritual such as screaming in the streets” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 122). Implicit to this concern is the understanding that homophobia had become so internalized for queers, that we were, on a certain level, prepared to die, as though the AIDS epidemic was our punishment for being who we are. To

resist this sense of resignation, Wojnarowicz invites another form of queer visibility: activism born from grief. To generate this form of activism he relies on his inner life of thought and imagination: “I imagine what it would be like if, each time a lover, friend, or stranger died of this disease, their friends, lovers or neighbors would take the dead body and drive with it in a car a hundred miles an hour to Washington d.c. and blast through the gates of the white house and come to a screeching halt before the entrance and dump their lifeless form on the front steps. It would be comforting to see those friends, neighbors, lovers and strangers mark time and place in such a public way” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 122).

The various relationships Wojnarowicz describes are similar to Delany’s vision of community and intimacy in his memoir. Wojnarowicz asserts the possibilities of a different kind of collective formed through connections and recognition between friends and lovers, but also through proximity and care between strangers. The notion of “neighbour” is important for queer spaces situated in New York City, where neighbourhoods such as the East Village were central meeting places and community hubs. In this sense “neighbors” can be familiar or not, but they still share common ground. In his journal, Wojnarowicz suggests that queer space could be used as a site of political expression and a counterpublic response to the death in his community: “It’s important to mark that time or moment of death. It’s healthy to make the private public, but the walls of the room or chapel are thin and unnecessary. One simple step can bring it out into a more public space. Don’t give me a memorial if I die. Give me a demonstration” (1999: 206).

In “Postcards from America: X Rays from Hell,” the narrator addresses the importance of queer visibility, both on a social level, and also for himself as a queer person and an artist: “Sex in America long ago slid into a small set of generic symbols... So people have found it necessary to define their sexuality in images, in photographs and drawing and movies in order not to

disappear” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 119). The vehicle for visibility is imagination, or the inner world the narrator returns to throughout the text. The narrator conjoins imagination with counterpublic activism as a creative force: “I’m beginning to believe that one of the last frontiers left for radical gesture is the imagination” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 120). He uses imagination for protection from various forms of homophobia, creating and reminding himself of his own worth and his own identity. He fantasizes pleasure with others or violence as a retaliation against discrimination (Wojnarowicz 1991: 120). He discusses fantasy and imagination that are fuelled by rage or eroticism in terms of “comfort” and “strength” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 120).

Wojnarowicz describes wanting to create images and content in order to reach out to younger generations of queers who may be feeling isolated or endangered. He also wants to leave documentation of his own work after he is gone. When *Close to the Knives* was published, he did an interview with Nan Goldin and explained, “My two biggest impulses for writing this book were: if some kid gets a hold of it and would feel less alienated, great. I really suffered as a teenager, because I never had any indication that there was anything out there that reflected myself. But I also wanted to leave a record. Because once this body drops I’d like some of my experience to live on. It was a total relief to have put words to what I put words to, an enormous relief” (Wojnarowicz 1991b: 62).

In Wojnarowicz’s memoir, the narrator addresses the process of making a private queer space into one that is public. He discusses the tension between craving anonymity while also finding comfort in seeing his “private experiences in the public environment” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 120). For him, the gesture of making these experiences visible is about sharing with others what is both familiar and counterpublic. As he explains: “They need not be representations of my own experience—they can be the experiences of and by others that merely come close to my

own or else disrupt the generic representations that have come to be the norm in the various medias outside my door” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 120). Queer visibility, achieved by making the private public, also provides him with a sense of inclusion: “When I witness diverse representations of ‘Reality’ on a gallery wall or in a book or a movie or in the spoken word or performance...the larger the range of representations, the more I feel there is room in the environment for my existence, that not the entire environment is hostile” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 120-121). This visibility allows for a sense of solidarity and a collective presence in public. It enables the formation of a queer social space: “Each public disclosure of a private reality becomes something of a magnet that can attract others with a similar frame of reference” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 121).

Wojnarowicz argues that queer visibility can be freeing but it can also be dangerous in a homophobic society. He explains, “To make the private into something public is an action that has terrific repercussions on the preinvented world” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 121). This action becomes “a dismantling tool against the illusion of the ONE-TRIBE NATION” and “reveals the probable existence of millions of tribes” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 121). He notes that queer visibility can spark and illuminate critical analysis, producing what he calls, “the possibility of an X-ray of Civilization , an examination of its foundations” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 121).

Wojnarowicz also strives for visibility in resistance to what he perceives is a falseness that infiltrates American culture. This falseness manifests in terms of the ways that history is perceived, and in relations between people and structures of power. His text creates a new space inside this false space that can be an alternative site or location he inhabits in order to survive and defend himself against what he calls “the pre-invented world” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 87-88). His creation of this queer space is figured as a “screen” that he can “reinvent and redefine...for

my own needs” in response to endangerment and hostility (Wojnarowicz 1991: 59). Chisholm suggests that this notion of creating a screen is the equivalent of “a resurfacing and projecting of delegitimized images of gay sexual history” (1994: 85). Wojnarowicz writes:

These are strange and dangerous times. Some of us are born with the cross hairs of a rifle scope printed on our backs or skulls. Sometimes it’s a matter of thought, sometimes activity, and most times it’s color....If the cops roll up in their vehicle with their shotguns cradled and bolted between the front seats, and the design of their genes and gray cells make it possible for them to put the guns on our bodies, then I can in that moment unfurl a screen that creates a horizon and a landscape that is uninfected by the letters and words of “law.” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 60)

In this narrative passage, Wojnarowicz speaks in coalitional terms. He associates the violence and hostility of racism experienced by people of color, with the homophobia he experiences as a white gay man. To draw comparisons or alignments between experiences of oppression while considering the ways in which they are different, was key for coalitional grassroots activism that emerged in response to AIDS. This coalitional way of thinking had the potential to produce effective liberation movements. It is a counterpublic approach that, like Wojnarowicz’s memoir, involves a radical attention to minoritarian experience in relation to normative systems and oppressions.

“Creating my own order”: Queer Spaces of the Streets

The streets are a significant queer space in Wojnarowicz’s text. They merge the private and the public, heightening depictions of the queer subject who is both lost and found in movement, and the states of emergency that are witnessed and experienced. As Maguire writes of Wojnarowicz, “The city streets became a haven from the hardships of his life at home....They are the site of his homelessness, the inspiration for his graffiti-styled art and the location of his constant cruising.

Also the streets are the battleground for the queer activism of the period; the marches, the demonstrations....Wojnarowicz's funeral itself" (2010: 284).

Wojnarowicz gained his early sexual experiences on the streets of New York as a homeless queer youth, though it wasn't until his late twenties that he began coming out. In an interview Wojnarowicz talks about his experience of hustling in terms of multiple desires, the tensions of living different lives, and occasionally his sense of fear (Interview 1989a:166). As an adult, he did not feel that he was separated from the streets he had left behind. In a letter to a friend he fantasizes that withdrawing back to the streets would be like a return (Carr 2012: 72). In an interview in 1989, he comments that: "Whenever I'm going through a bad time, I always feel like I'm one step away from going back to the streets" (Wojnarowicz 1989a: 166).

He describes the queer space of the streets as a site of intimate exchanges and fleeting connections that are undermined by violence, the threat of abuse, or internalized homophobia. Similarly, many of the social exchanges involve power dynamics that result in abuse or exploitation as well as betrayal.

It is movement through the streets, often instigated by the dreams, that is particularly emphasized in Wojnarowicz's writing. Movement makes attempts at freedom material and tangible, asserting a poetic and queer presence in resistance to the laws of the land. As Wojnarowicz concludes in his interview: "It's basically just walking through their illusion, their projection of order, and creating my own order in it out of all the fragmentary stuff that surrounds us, that we call life" (Interview 1989b: 198). This notion of walking is particularly significant because it also allows for creative production and forms of witnessing in the text. Solnit describes how the action of walking in Wojnarowicz's writing "appears like a refrain, a beat: he always returns to the image of himself walking alone down a New York street or a

corridor” (2000: 192). She notes how Wojnarowicz uses the phrase “coming off the street” to describe his shift from homelessness in queer youth, to the shelter of queer adulthood.

According to Solnit: “The phrase describes all streets as one street and that street as a whole world, with its own citizenry, laws, language. ‘The street’ is a world where people in flight from the traumas that happen inside houses become natives of the outside” (2000: 193).

In Wojnarowicz’s writing about being a queer youth, poverty and homelessness are constant threads throughout the narratives. The queer body of the narrator is transient in the spaces of Times Square, streets, soup kitchens, cafeterias, motel rooms and apartments. He is also transient in the arms of lovers, strangers, and customers. His language documents and conveys these transitory aspects and anchors them as witnessed phenomena that can be documented to form a queer archive. The qualities of this archive include its apparent random immediacy and a dual sense of fleeting obscurity. Conversely, the representations of the narrator’s experiences on the streets are presented as altogether personal and specific within the broad public spaces of a city. Overall, the narratives of these spaces throw into relief the fluidity between sex and violence in the context of the young hustler’s experiences of sexual encounters with his customers.

The first tangible streetscape in the text appears in the narrative, “Self-Portrait in Twenty-Three Rounds,” which was first published and performed at readings in 1984, before Wojnarowicz was aware of AIDS in his personal life (Carr 2012: 252). One of the reasons this work is significant is that he is asserting his own personal narrative by calling it “Self-Portrait.” Though he had published a chapbook of monologues prior to writing this narrative, none of those pieces explicitly represented as his own experiences. In “Self-Portrait” he is insisting on being

recognized as the subject of the narrative. The private queer space of his internal world is made visible. The narrative is about his own experiences as a hustler when he was a young teenager.

“Self-Portrait in Twenty-Three Rounds,” begins its description of the street in medias res, from the perspective of narrator sitting on the ground:

My eyes start separating: one goes left and one goes right and after four days sitting on some stoop on a side street head cradled in my arms seeing four hours of pairs of legs walking by too much traffic noise and junkies trying to rip us off and the sunlight so hot this is a new york summer I feel my brains slowly coming to boil in whatever red-blue liquid the brains float in and looking down the street or just walking around I begin to see large rats the size of shoeboxes; (Wojnarowicz 1991: 4)

The narrator’s observations are pulled in different, contradictory directions. He is situated in the moving chaos of a public streetscape that, through its sheer size and speed of change, is less overtly regulated than private space. His position in relation to this site, on the ground, hinders a sense of peace or wellbeing. It is slightly off the main drag, “some stoop on a side street,” yet it is still caught up in transitory movement, “four pairs of legs walking by too much traffic noise” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 4). Apart from the exterior space, the “whatever red-blue” forms the narrator’s internal environment. It is used to describe the “liquid the brains float in,” and is a color combination that reoccurs throughout the text. As the two colors of the American flag, it could represent American society or the American nation state. This description also immediately makes the personal site and space of the body a visceral, vital, and political concern. It is significant that “my brains” are mentioned right away along with the body, “my arms.” They are prioritized by a narrator who works by selling his body—his surface and what he can do with it, for other people—rather than selling what he can do with his intellect. The description of his inner world is enclosed by two layers. The first layer is the outer physical space of the body and its limbs, where his “head” is “cradled” in his arms (Wojnarowicz 1991:4). The second is the space of his skull. This is where the “liquid the brains float in” is being held and physically and

metaphysically transformed “to a boil” by the exterior public surface of a hot, chaotic, sometimes threatening, Manhattan streetscape (Wojnarowicz 1991:4). The cradling of head suggests resignation, escape, self-protection, or self-care. The use of “cradled” also marks a tenderness toward the head, especially important to a narrator who must protect and prioritize his own mind in a space and culture that is threatening and destructive towards him or renders his presence, his perspective, and his voice, as invisible and unheard.

The next narrative that represents the queer space of the streets is set on the Upper East Side where the narrator and his “buddy” get picked up by a customer. Here the space marks a threshold and is accompanied by a sense of fear about the potential threat of a stranger. When the customer is about to bring the two boys into his apartment, the potential for violence is signified: “My buddy’s meat cleaver dropped out the back of his pants just as the guy was opening the door to his building and clang clangalang the guy went apeshit his screams bouncing off half a million windows of surrounding apartments we ran thirty block till we felt safe” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 4). When the man begins to yell, the city street itself, like a canyon between the steep walls of private property, becomes a screaming enemy. The narrator and his companion run, probably back downtown, “thirty blocks” until they feel “safe” in a familiar terrain.

Almost immediately following this escape, the narrator turns around triumphant, this time not running away but confronting the entire city as he wrecks public property. In this description he asserts that he can alter the space through a connection with his buddy:

Some nights we’d walk the whole island of manhattan crisscrossing east and west north and south each on opposite sides of the streets picking up every wino bottle we found and throwing it ten feet into the air so it crash exploded a couple of inches away from the other’s feet—on nights that called for it every pane of glass in every phone booth from here to south street would dissolve in a shower of light. We slept good after a night of this in some abandoned car boiler room rooftop or lonely drag queen’s palace. (Wojnarowicz 1991: 5)

The distances that are covered and the damage that is created seem exaggerated in this description. They bring the narrator exhilaration and satisfaction. Because the narrative tone seems more fanciful than real, the reader begins to question whether other details and scenarios in this piece are true. The tone of realism emerges from the vividness of narrator's inner world, and the emotions and sensations he expresses. The narrator's actions in this passage make him feel safe and in control of the city space by creating his own violent chaos. Like the "brushfires in the social landscape" the shattering of glass at night is described with an illuminative quality, "a shower of light," that could be considered beautiful (Wojnarowicz 1991: Acknowledgements n. pag., 5). The vandalism is rendered as a requirement for some unspecified reason, just like the carrying of meat cleavers as weapons are assumed to be necessary.

Another significant space that involves the streetscape, this one more precarious, is the space of memory. It moves into the narrator's consciousness with a rhythm and tone reiterated and displayed through form and content as "tidal" like waves of the ocean (Wojnarowicz 1991: 5). The remembrance is triggered by the possibility of exile, so it could represent a space of origin, though not a shelter:

If I were to leave this country and never come back or see it again in films or sleep I would still remember a number of different things that sift back in some kind of tidal motion. I remember when I was eight years old I would crawl out the window of my apartment seven stories above the ground and hold on to the ledge with ten scrawny fingers and lower myself out above the sea of cars burning up eight avenue and hang there like a stupid motherfucker for five minutes at a time testing my own strength dangling I liked the rough texture of the bricks against the tips of my sneakers and when I got tired I'd haul myself back in for a few minutes' rest and then climb back out testing testing testing how do I control this how much control do I have how much strength do I have waking up with a mouthful of soot sleeping on these shitty bird-filled rooftops waking up to hard-assed sunlight burning the tops of my eyes and I ain't had much to eat in three days except for the steak we stole from the A&P cooked in some bum kitchen down on the lower east side. (Wojnarowicz 1991: 6)

In this passage there are parallels drawn between the memory of hanging from the window sill as a child who doesn't know or doesn't care about the danger of such an action, and memory of being homeless as a queer youth. Both situations seem to be a test of strength and willpower of the narrator as he inhabits these precarious spaces. He talks about "testing" his "strength" and "control" in each of these environments. Finally, in this particular piece it is important to note the reoccurring theme of the narrative subject who is trapped internally within the space of his body.

In the narrative "Being Queer in America," the queer space of the streets is created by the reality of living with AIDS: "You can't shut out the sound of it: the sound of the man standing on the sidewalk trying to scream that...he wants to stop that slowly drawn line approaching from the distance with all the...measure and intent of crushing him but the guy is too weak to even get this amount of control over his life, he can't even throw a fit the proper way" (Wojnarowicz 1991: 66-67). This scenario is repeated in another narrative in the text, "Living Close to the Knives," where the narrator explicitly identified as Wojnarowicz is conversing with a friend, Anita, about another's friend's emotional struggle with an AIDS-related illness: "By the time I reached Anita, he was in the distance, a tiny speck of agitation with windmill arms. I asked her what happened. 'I don't know...he went into a rage—he threatened to throw himself in front of the traffic. The saddest thing is that he's too weak to throw a proper fit'" (Wojnarowicz 1991: 92). While the narrator focuses on what it feels like to be sick, he also addresses what it is like to witness a lover or a friend living with AIDS:

Those images hurl themselves from the corners of a fast-paced city and you can't even imagine death properly enough to tell this guy you understand what he's railing against. I mean, hell, on the first day that he found out he had this certain virus he bent down to pick up a letter addressed to him that had fallen from the mailbox and he turned and said, "Even something so simple as getting a letter in the mail has an entirely different meaning." (Wojnarowicz 1991: 67)

The dying man whom the narrator describes may be Hujar, because in an interview in 1989 Wojnarowicz recalls Hujar saying something very similar about the experience of getting mail when he was ill (Interview 1989a: 175).

The streets are also a queer space of grief that emerges in the wake of AIDS. In a narrative that is based on Wojnarowicz's personal writing about dealing with Hujar's death, the narrator grieves the death of his lover. The narrator turns to the city and to walking as a way to handle the grief of his loss. He is drawn towards the city streets that, in their "dying," could reflect the death of queers from AIDS: "I walked for hours through the streets after he died, through the gathering darkness and traffic, down into the dying section of town where bodies litter curbsides and dogs tear apart the stinking garbage by the doorways" (Wojnarowicz 1991: 67).

Grief has made the narrator's glance and his perceptions unflinching. He looks nowhere else but into the mess of reality, both material and political, and the huge loss brought about by his lover's death: "I kicked around an alleyway among the piles of rotting fish, buzzing flies, piles of clothing and fluttering newspapers of the past with photographs of presidents and their waving wives" (Wojnarowicz 1991: 67). What he encounters is a symbolic expression of the privatization of public space: "A fat white man naked to the waist suddenly materialized and sat up angrily. He had an enormous pale belly on which was incised a terrible wound from which small white worms tumbled as he gesticulated like a marionette, shrieking, 'DO YOU HAVE PERMISSION FROM THE OWNER OF THE ALLEY TO BE HERE?'" (Wojnarowicz 1991: 68). It is significant that Wojnarowicz encountered a similar response from Hujar's landlord about the ownership of Hujar's loft soon after he died. The landlord wanted to convert the building into commercial space and get rid of all the tenants (Carr 2012: 396). Wojnarowicz

went to civil court and was allowed to stay, however the building was turned into a multiplex and for the last years of his life he dealt with loud construction, dust, power outages, and flooding in the loft (Carr 2012: 414-15, 447, 487, 497, 508, 517). This passage could also be interpreted as Wojnarowicz's commentary on the shifting status of public space and the cost of living in downtown Manhattan.

In the streets, the narrator becomes a visionary, witnessing the passage of historical time on a massive scale, which results not in forward motion but in a simultaneity "of a minute vision" that reflects the compression of time. (Wojnarowicz 1991: 69) Wojnarowicz conveys historical development as full of violence that is bodily, industrial, and technological:

The center is something outside of what we know as visual, more a sensation: a huge fat clockwork of civilizations...a malfunctioning cannonball filled with bone and gristle and gearwheels and knives and bullets and animals rotting with skeletal remains and pistons and smokestacks pump-pumping cinders and lighting and shreds of flesh, spewing language and motions and shit and entrails in its wake. It's all swirling in every direction simultaneously...embracing stasis beyond the ordinary sense of stillness one witnesses in death. (Wojnarowicz 1991: 69)

The narrator is haunted by his sense of how history is proceeding, both in terms of his own personal loss and on the larger scale of human civilization. He also sees this history in ordinary gestures, some of which happen on the street: "This is the vision I see beneath the tiniest gesture of wiping one's lips after a meal or observing a traffic light" (Wojnarowicz 1991: 69).

The streets are represented as potentially dangerous for queers. In section five of "Being Queer in America," a homophobic assault on the street is described. The narrative is a monologue by a "man on second avenue at 2:00 A.M." detailing an assault of someone he knows (Wojnarowicz 1991: 70). The speaker highlights the fact that the bystanders, "a bunch of guys," were unwilling to help the queer man being beaten by "kids from Jersey" (Wojnarowicz 1991: 71). The narrator describes the man's broken body (Wojnarowicz 1991: 71). Despite the assault,

the man's mind is in motion, and he "apparently...hallucinated" his escape (Wojnarowicz 1991: 71). This is another reference by the narrator to the strength of the imagination as a means of protection or relief from suffering. Yet the man's imagination could not allow him to literally escape. He is "found by the cops on West street" and remained "unconscious for about six days" (Wojnarowicz 1991: 71).

Section six of "Being Queer in America" is divided into short narratives describing queer spaces in which the narrator has sex with various strangers. The narrator describes going to a porn cinema near the piers, "in the skid-row section of town," where "the only movement in the streets was the automobiles cruising along the curbside and river parking lot" (Wojnarowicz 1991: 71). He depicts the streetscape in detail, as if wanting to make an impression with the setting as much as with the action that occurs there: "Tall granite buildings with tiny windows speckled with fluorescent lights; gray vague shapes in the dripping alleyways and shit and garbage rattling in the wind along the flooded gutters, splashes of red and green neon sliding across the wet pavements" (Wojnarowicz 1991: 71). As with earlier sections, the narrative focuses on the "minute vision" of a stranger and the fleeting details of their existence: "A skinny bum with red bare feet—once somebody's little baby," (Wojnarowicz 1991: 71, 72). The massive scale of a metaphorical crash of civilization is contrasted with the local scale of a driver hitting an animal with a car, "a small black dog hurtles through the wet evening air amid a squeal of tires and thumping of glass and all civilization is at the wheel" (Wojnarowicz 1991: 71, 72).

In a later section, the narrator describes being in love with a partner. After their sexual encounter, he starts walking home through the streets: "So here I am heading out into the cold winds of the canyon streets, walking down and across avenue c toward my home with the smell and taste of him wrapped around my neck and jaw like a scarf" (Wojnarowicz 1991: 79-80).

When he walks past symbols of domesticity such as families with children and wedding cakes, he thinks back to a scene with his lover and how they both recalled their early experiences of queer sexuality as kids (Wojnarowicz 1991: 80). The narrator, remembering how he was mesmerized by his uncle's body, concludes: "I stared and stared and sometimes played with his arms for hours and I remember feeling a slight dizziness that years later I came to see first as a curse and then as a tool: a wedge that I might successfully drive between me and a world that was rapidly becoming more and more insane" (Wojnarowicz 1991: 80). This wedge of difference is something that Wojnarowicz uses as an artist and a writer to make sense of the world around him and to celebrate minoritarian differences in the face of hostility, destruction, and heteronormative structures. It is the minoritarian condition of difference that he values in himself. The streets allow for his flood of memory, his preoccupied thoughts, and his statement in resistance to assimilation. When he is walking in the streets he has time and freedom to reflect by remaining solitary and moving through space.

Wojnarowicz then documents a queer space in the midst of the AIDS crisis, this one public, in the streets, where familiar strangers are altered in appearance, where fleeting connections are emphasized, and the queer space of the body flashes up as a disappearing vision to be witnessed before it is gone. The narrator describes:

One homely queen," with coke bottle thick glasses and long straggly hair. Sometimes he was alone, sometimes on the arm of a tough-looking street hustler or borderline homeless type. Our eyes have met for twelve years and we have never spoken a word, not even a nod, but we have had whole conversations in that brief contact....In the last few years I have taken comfort when rounding a corner east or west and suddenly coming upon this familiar stranger and seeing that he'd changed very little....Yesterday I was walking down first avenue and was crossing the street from one corner to the next when I came upon him walking in the opposite direction. I saw him at the last second just as our bodies passed among turning cars and the first thing I recognized were his eyes, only now they were wild with misery and panic and it was only then that I realized his face and neck were blurred with Kaposi lesions like a school of burgundy-colored fish upturning around the contours of his jaw. (Wojnarowicz 1991: 167)

The detail of the description is significant here, as if it is poetic testimony dedicated to a precise witnessing of this “familiar stranger” and his illness. The anonymity of the encounter is displaced by a careful rendering.

In “The Suicide of a Guy Who Once Built a an Elaborate Shrine Over a Mouse Hole” Wojnarowicz hangs out with his friends in the Lower East Side, “alphabetland,” during the day, “climbing the fire escapes of the burnt-out buildings. All the doors are blocked with cinderblocks or are chained and bolted steel doors and the fire escapes are the only way to get inside. In the night hours it’s all drug dealers and guns” (1991: 179). They only linger in the neighborhood when it is light outside, spending “hours climbing through the burnt-out slum tenements examining evidence of lives in the melted junk hastily left behind when sirens once wailed through the winter streets” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 180).

He also talks about taking drugs and hanging out in the streets near Times Square, along 42nd Street, which is the only section of this narrative that lacks a nihilistic perspective. As narrator, Wojnarowicz describes the street scene in great detail, all the fleeting images, some of which he tries to document by taking a picture with his camera (1991: 180-81). Through the effects of the drugs and also his pleasure in the city space, he is overcome, “so moved by the details” that he forgets to take a picture (Wojnarowicz 1991: 181). He realizes that, “all the world is a sliding sensation filled with things to buy and things bought” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 181). Sometimes what he sees enters his consciousness by triggering memories, vague or vivid (Wojnarowicz 1991: 181-82). The details he notices often allow the space of the streets or someone’s body to become queer spaces, such as wishing “I could pick up that guy’s arm and examine the elaborate tattoos on his biceps and fingers,” or noticing “the face of a prostitute in the biggest wig I ever seen all flamed red and there’s something in her eyes: it can only be a guy”

(Wojnarowicz 1991: 182). His camera is a “rectangle” that can surround “everything,” so that nothing is lost, “even the spit and tin cans underfoot and the fragments of moving arms and legs” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 182). He feels like he is part of the details, “drifting by through a tiny window” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 182), and therefore part of what is also seen.

As narrator, Wojnarowicz is a voyeur as well as a participant, memorizing the cityscape through its intensity: “I keep getting frozen fragments of faces. An eye with all the language one could hear casting over its surface and a neck I’d like to put my tongue to and I’m amazed at how many different styles...there are in the world...’til the day I die I will always have these photographs in my brain”(1991: 182). What is most evident from these observations and the descriptions of his wanderings is his openness to the world around him and his willingness to bear witness to the queer space of the street and its inhabitants.

“I’m losing myself in the language of his movements”: Queer Spaces of the Piers

1979 was a significant turning point in Wojnarowicz’s life as a writer and artist because of his fresh discovery of the piers, a long series of abandoned buildings along the Hudson River, running from Christopher Street to 14th Street, where gay men met to socialize and have sex. The West Side Highway, closed to traffic since 1973, separated the piers from Greenwich Village and provided shelter to trans sex workers along the strip (Carr 2012: 132). Gay bars lined the city side of the bridge, and trucks parked along the highway also provided spaces for casual sex (Carr 2012: 132). Pier 34 at Canal Street was often used as a site for gay cruising, and later it became a hub for the creative culture of writers, musicians, artists, poets and filmmakers from the East Village and Lower East Side (Carr 2012: 224). Wojnarowicz also explored Pier 28 at Spring St, which was a less popular site because the floor was collapsing (Carr 2012: 204).

The piers are a pre-AIDS space that Wojnarowicz wrote about before he was conscious of AIDS as a reality in his life and community. They provided a space outside of heteronormative social structures (Carr 2012: 141). They also represented a space for the queer erotics of quotidian life, a theme that is amplified throughout Wojnarowicz's writing. In 1979, he connected experiences of anonymous sex with possibility (Carr 2012: 142): "Really it's this lawlessness and anonymity simultaneously that I desire, living among thugs, but men who live under no degree of law or demand, just continual motion and robbery and light roguishness and motion" (Wojnarowicz, *Fales Series 1*, 2.36 Oct. 7, 1979). Writing about the piers and the sex that happened there, pre-AIDS, was erotically charged for Wojnarowicz, whether the scenes and exchanges he described involved him or not (Carr 2012: 143). He was motivated to document, articulate and represent the queer spaces he found at the piers, especially the freedom they provided, the anonymity in movement, and what Carr calls the "autonomous zone" that they represented (Wojnarowicz 1991:132). He found aesthetic beauty and power in their deteriorating, broken, and sometimes dangerous qualities. He called the queer space of the piers, "picturesque ruins" (qtd. in Carr 2012: 3), carefully documenting and recreating them in his writing.

The twining of cruising and creative work are two aspects of experience often linked for Wojnarowicz, especially in scenes situated at the piers. Visual art seemed to be a way for him to create the spaces of the piers he wanted to inhabit. Carr argues that the piers were the centre of his life for the next year and a half (2012: 131).

Wojnarowicz began to record the piers with a Super 8 camera—a mode of recording and expression that had profound effects on much of his work. Super 8 mm sound film was first introduced in 1973, and audio could be recorded either concurrently to the filming, or afterwards

from an audiotape or record, on its magnetic sound-strip (Yokobosky 2006: 127, n. 1). As a result, this kind of filming was more versatile and accessible than other alternatives, which led to its popularity among video artists in the 1970s.

Wojnarowicz's use of the Super 8 camera at the piers marks the point when he first started representing queer spaces of sex and intimacy, often as anonymous exchanges, which then became a consistent theme throughout his work. In 1980 he wrote two scripts for a silent, black-and-white Super 8 film. Carr describes these scripts as dealing with the ordinary "eroticism in everyday life" such as cruising, "but also about repression, represented by cops bursting into a room" (Wojnarowicz 1991:153). He planned, in his handwritten script, to feature a naked man bound to a chair to show, "that waterfront/bar sexuality can be seen as either a result of, or an attempt to break the weight of social/political restraints" (qtd. in Carr 2012: 153). In Wojnarowicz's work there is an ambiguity and simultaneity of meanings in his representations of queer spaces. Violence and danger are presented as a result of policing and homophobia, as well as produced in response to these forms of repression and discrimination.

Wojnarowicz drew the face of the late nineteenth-century French poet, Arthur Rimbaud, on a windowpane in one of the abandoned buildings (Carr 2012: 132), marking his space as an artist, but also suggesting that he found traces of this literary figure who inspired him at the piers. After Pier 34 became a hub for artists, Wojnarowicz's cartoon imagery, painted directly on the wall, was recognized there. According to Carr, he was learning how to be a painter in these deteriorating structures (2012: 205).

In the memoir, the piers are a queer space collectively created by the men who hung out there for sexual encounters, and the artists who gave the site meaning through their work. A self-appointed artist in residence, Tava, painted what Wojnarowicz called "thug frescoes" (Carr 2012:

141), huge murals of men engaged in sexual activities that covered the inner and outer walls of the warehouses (Carr 2012:141). According to artist Mike Bidlo, an acquaintance and collaborator with Wojnarowicz, the artist Luis Frangella also made art at the piers, painting floor to ceiling murals and portraits on cardboard boxes that were cut at forty-five degree angles (Interview 2006: 29). The queer spaces of the piers provided opportunities for intimacy with strangers, and for artists to intervene in the landscape with work that was creatively and erotically charged. The piers were also a site for scavenging—as a hustle or a search—for encounter, for beauty, for a place to do art. McCormick points out that “David was very much into scavenging. That’s part of the aesthetic that developed out of Civilian Warfare and other East Village galleries: it was taking the detritus of the city and using it as material for art” (Interview 2006: 13). The piers were littered with broken down furniture and cabinets of documents. Wojnarowicz would move through this wreckage just like he walked the shores in New Jersey looking for driftwood to use in his early sculptures and installations.

At Pier 28, as Carr explains, Wojnarowicz discovered what seemed like thousands of cardboard cartons of files from the city prison system. He described the materials to her: “Psychological profiles of prisoners, documentation from murder scenes, surveillance photographs, court transcripts....All from the fifties, and that material was so heavy visually that my reaction was not to touch it” (qtd. in Carr 2012: 195). For Wojnarowicz, the images and meanings of this content could not be represented and were therefore off limits for his work as an artist.

In his descriptions of sexual encounters at the piers, Wojnarowicz begins and ends up alone, but the interactions he has there are depicted as glimpsed revelations. The first time he writes about the piers is in October 1979 (Carr 2012: 140). The entry in his journal begins, “I’m

losing myself in the language of his movements,” and describes a sexual encounter with a stranger, concluding, “all these unspoken sentences at the tip of my tongue” (Wojnarowicz, Fales Series 1.2.36, Oct. 7, 1979). This is also the first draft of “Losing the Form in Darkness,” a narrative that is included in *Close to the Knives* (Carr 2012: 144). Soon after this particular sexual encounter, Wojnarowicz decided that he wanted to live his life for experiences like it: “The combination of time, elements, visuals, visions, light, movements, all associations....as if that past moment holds everything that will make my life valid, that will save my life....having tasted real freedom, a freeing of myself from this life from this city rotating with the world on its axis” (Fales Series 1.2.36, Oct. 9, 1979). In fact, he conceives of these interactions not simply in terms of the physical and emotional experience of sex, but also in literary terms. The descriptions of his sexual encounters are consistently conveyed through poetic language and symbolism.

Very often the descriptions of sex and eroticism in this pre-AIDS queer space deal specifically with his shifting experiences of time. Watching men at the piers drift over to a sexual scene they can take part in as spectators, he declares his wish for “lifelong moments, unbreathing, no need for food, no need to scratch or shift, the lengths of measure contained in the dragging feel of the large man who follows me from room to room, emptiness shadowed by rusting floor safes and broken glass that holds pieces of the sky along the dark floorboards” (Wojnarowicz, Fales Series 1.2.36, Oct. 23, 1979).

In the summer of 1980, Wojnarowicz goes up onto the roof of piers where men lay sunbathing nude, and is moved to write a piece documenting the space. He repeats the trope of red and blue colors found in the first narrative of the text that described a scene of hustling (Wojnarowicz 1991: 4). But in this narrative about the piers, it is not his brain that is enclosed by the colors. Instead it is his body that interacts with them and alters their design: “Turning is the

motion that disrupts the vision of fine red and blue lines weaving through the western skies” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 10). If the colors are a symbolic representation of America then the narrative suggests that within the queer space of the piers counterpublic experiences are possible. These experiences could include queer resistance to the controls of the state and to the normative vision of what America means.

Wojnarowicz has a vision of vastness and sees himself within it, connected with others and moving through history: “I pulled myself up through the roof overhead and stood above the city and saw...the red hint of the skies where the west lies; saw myself in other times, moving my legs along the long flat roads of asphalt and weariness moving in and out of cars...dust storms rolling across the plains and the red neoned motels of other years and rides and the distant darkness of unnamable cities” (Fales Series 1.1.14. July 6, 1980). Here, Wojnarowicz’s depiction of America juxtaposes rural and urban landscapes. In doing so he gestures to an American literary tradition that celebrates and mythologizes these diverse features of the country.

In the Acknowledgments section of *Close to the Knives*, which Wojnarowicz wrote at the end of his life, he refers to the piers and the pre-AIDS queer space they represented. He offers a dedication to “[t]he Drag Queens along the Hudson River and their truly revolutionary states” (Wojnarowicz 1991: Acknowledgements n. pag.). The piers are a queer space that enable the experiences, the interactions, and the “revolutionary” queer existence he notes there (Wojnarowicz 1991: 9). The permeable and porous qualities of the queer spaces of the piers allow passage, entry and exit, thereby removing boundaries or barriers between categories and containments. As a result, inner and outer spaces coalesce: “See the quiet outline of a dog’s head in plaster, simple as the splash of a fish in dreaming, and then the hole in the wall farther along, framing a jagged sky swarming with glints of silver and light. So simple, the appearance of night

in a room full of strangers” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 9). Here, a painting on a wall is compared to a movement in a dream, and both images are conveyed through words denoting sound, such as “quiet” and “splash”. Literal gaps in the structure of the building produce a “framing” of the sky, like another kind of painting on the wall. The figurative image of night appears inside a room and changes its dimensions, making it possible for anything imagined to occur privately, in darkness. Later in the narrative, this trope of the outside coming in is repeated, with: “small rectangles of light and wind and river over on the far wall” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 16). Glass, usually the demarcation between outside and inside, is “emptied” from the window, so that “sunlight is burning through” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 16). This entrance of the light occurs just as the narrator is entering a stranger: “We’re moving around, changing positions that allow us to bend and sway and lean forward into each other’s arms....He is...pulling my body into his” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 16).

In describing the piers, Wojnarowicz makes reference to historical figures or imagery, thereby merging different temporal and spatial locations within the scenes that are represented: “The drag queen in the dive waterfront coffee shop,” whose “coy seductive smile...reveals a mouth of rotted teeth,” reminds him of “the childlike rogue slipped out from the white-sheeted bed of Pasolini” (1991: 10). The tattoos on a stranger, “lift around his neck like frescoes of faded photographs of samurai warriors: a sudden flash of Mishima’s private army standing still as pillars along the sides of the river” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 14). The narrative observations turn self-reflective, as if implying his own desire is the motivation for some of the references being made. He notes how a stranger appears: “Handsome like some face in old boxer photographs, a cross between an aging boxer and Mayakovsky. He had a nose that might have once been broken in some dark avenue barroom in a distant city invented by some horny young kid” (Wojnarowicz

1991: 14-15). According to this observation, the entire frame of reference for the image could be fantasized by Wojnarowicz as narrator. In another narrative in *Close to the Knives*, “Postcards from America: X Rays from Hell,” Wojnarowicz talks about how his strategies for survival, especially when he was growing up in American society where his sexuality was denied or vilified, were to produce his own imagery and cultural references (1991: 120-123). His creative iconography emerges throughout the narratives about the piers. The reader becomes a witness to the narrator’s personal associations, cultural references, and imagination. A figure who grabs at him is “someone out of an old Todd Browning image” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 19). A man he sees in a waterfront bar “looked like some faraway character straight from the fields of old skittering wheat and someone I once traveled with by pickup truck with beer cans in the dusty backseat and buzz in the head from summer” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 20).

Sometimes the compression of time and geographical location in one space is suggested explicitly, such as the passage describing “The image of Jean Genet cut loose from the fine lines of fiction, uprooted from age and time and continent, and hung up slowly behind my back against a tin wall” (Wojnarowicz 1991:: 10). In the text, it is ambiguously suggested that Genet may be haunting the space with his presence, or is reflected in another man who is cruising there: “It’s a simple sense of turning slowly, feeling the breath of another body in a quiet room, the stillness shattered by the scraping of a fingernail against a collar line. Turning...is the motion that sets into trembling the subtle water movements of shadows, like lines following the disappearance of a man beneath the surface of an abandoned lake” (Wojnarowicz 1991:10).

The cinematic rendering Wojnarowicz uses is both implicit and explicit within the narrative. He describes: “The maze of hallways wandered as in films” (1991: 9). This figurative concept is generated by moving through the space and recording it like a camera: “Restless

walks filled with coasting images of sight and sound” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 12). For the narrator, his memories also carry this visual form: “Sitting over coffee and remembering the cinematic motions as if witnessed from a discreet distance, I lay the senses down one by one” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 13). The narrator conjoins film and painting when trying to convey the way light comes through a window screen: “The frame still contains a rusted screen that reduces shapes and colors into tiny dots like a film directed by Seurat” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 16). Cesare Casarino argues that Wojnarowicz’s focus on bodies in movement, particularly in terms of speed, represents a “cinematic imperative” (2001: n. pag.). Similar to the appearance of memory, Casarino believes that in Wojnarowicz’s work, “life is seen in filmic motion, remembered in film sequences, and recorded as a film” (2001: n. pag.).

There is also a sense of collapse and fading attributed to the piers as a queer space. They are referred to by Wojnarowicz as “abandoned structures” (1991: 16). They are also depicted as falling away, yet the descriptive poetic language retains their vividness: “The man without an eye against a receding wall, the subtle deterioration of weather, of shading, of images engraved in the flaking walls” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 9). The space, defined as “small offices” or an “office cubicle” seems to have suffered attack: “Paper from old shipping lines scattered all around like bomb blasts among wrecked pieces of furniture” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 16). Language such as “receding,” “deterioration,” and “flaking,” suggests that the whole structure of the space is gradually coming apart (Wojnarowicz 1991: 9). These qualities represent a metaphor for America, which Wojnarowicz perceives as a dying country. The narrator and a stranger have sex inside an office cubicle where the floor itself seems to be sinking into the water: “the carpet beneath our shifting feet reveals our steps with slight pools of water” (Wojnarowicz 1991:16).

For Wojnarowicz, as narrator, a sense of accumulation and heightening is sustained by qualities of ambiguity and recklessness in the disintegrating environment of the piers: “Old images race back and forth and I’m gathering a heat in the depths of my belly from them...I’m being buoyed by these discreet pleasures, walking the familiar streets and river” (1991: 12-13). Here, Wojnarowicz echoes Whitman, and the legacy of a queer American vision, cataloguing the details and accumulating elements of his surroundings, celebrating the diversity, which brings him “pleasures.” The narrator is attuned to simultaneous sensory experiences of sound and vision: “Each desire, each memory so small a thing, becomes a small river tracing the outlines and the drift of your arms and bare legs, dark mouth and the spoken words of strangers” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 13).

As a queer space, the piers allow for ambiguity that is full of possibility, and a movement between present and past in the form of memory that is half-deciphered and recalled. The connection between memory and dreams is underscored: Outside the darkness has “a seediness like dream darkness you can breathe in or be consumed by,” and inside, “layers of evening” produce the emergence of a “stranger” like “a dim memory,” who remains “faceless for moments, just the movements of his body across the floor” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 10, 11). The narrative perspective drifts outside again where car headlights illuminate “the outlines of men, of strangers, people I might or might not have known because their faces were invisible” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 11). The narrator speaks of the limitations of his own memories and yet he is vulnerable to what the past brings back, both in terms of pain and desire: “I can barely remember the senses I had when viewing these streets for the first time. There’s a whole change in psyche and yet there are slight traces that cut me with the wounding nature of *déjà vu*, filled with old senses of desire” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 13). His memories lose their sounds, as objects

are reduced to an elementary state: “Something silent that is recalled, the sense of age in a familiar place, the emptied heart and light of the eyes, the white bones of street lamps and moving autos, the press of memory turning over and over” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 13). A rain reminds him of rain showers as a kid, explicitly situated in an American landscape of “old jersey,” where “nuns in the cool green summers would hitch up their long black skirt and toss a white medicine ball to each other in a kind of memory slow motion” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 14). Just like Wojnarowicz’s descriptions of the physical site of the piers function as a metaphor for America, his memories are consistently focused on American landscapes, inscribing these sites with a range of poetic qualities, often emerging from a queer perspective. His memory has similar weight and movement throughout the narrative, slowly drifting and hovering in the air as if it bears the quality of a dream-state.

Just as the queer space of the piers provides certain perceptions and encounters with memory, it also allows a larger perspective on the city. From one of the warehouses he, “looked out the side windows into the squall, tiny motions of the wet city,” and beside the river he can see “way over the movements of the city” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 19). The sights and sounds of “coasting images” the narrator encounters in his “restless walks” at the piers also allow him to hear a broad spectrum of the city itself: “Faraway sounds of voices and cries and horns roll up and funnel in like some secret earphone connecting me with the creaking movements of the living city” (Wojnarowicz 1991:12).

A reoccurring image of slanted light passing over figures and forms is used to explore and convey the experience of gay cruising at the piers. The narrator notes: “The light of doorway after doorway casting itself across the length” of a strangers legs (Wojnarowicz 1991:11). He observes “Headlights like lighthouse beacons drifted over the surface of the river, brief and

unobtrusive, then swinging around and illuminating the outlines of men, of strangers” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 11). He notes how “swinging headlights from cars entering the riverside parking lot” catch a stranger “among the fine slanting lines of wind and water” (Wojnarowicz 1991:14). This is the motion of cruising—the brief revelatory glances, emboldened by subsequent darkness, the catching or grasping at quick visions of another in order to attain the possibility and recognition of attraction or possible intimacy: “Various smiles spark from the darkening rooms, from behind car windows” (Wojnarowicz 1991:13). The expansiveness of space is suggested in these descriptions, because open space is needed to allow the light to travel across lengths and distances, stretching across perimeters.

At the piers, the narrative describes how bodies produce the queer space. A stranger becomes part of the structure of a building while retaining his physical separateness: “The man without the eye against a receding wall” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 9). The man approaches as the background that frames him disappears, filling up the narrator’s frame of vision: “He was moving in with the gradual withdrawal of the light” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 10). The stranger’s body, as queer space, is a physical presence in the visual landscape: “a passenger on the shadows” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 10). He communicates to the narrator and is read by him through a “language of...movements” (Wojnarowicz 1991:10). Part of what this communication triggers in the narrator is desire, even if reciprocation or the possibility of meeting the stranger remains elusive. The turn-on for the narrator emerges in imagined interactions: “Standing there sipping from a green bottle, I could see myself taking the nape of his neck in my teeth as he turned and stared out the window at the rolling lines of traffic for a moment” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 20). He feels the stranger’s body in his own hands: “Light curved around his face and the back of his head, the shaved hair produced sensations that I could feel across the palm of my hand, my

sweating hand, all the way from where I stood on the other side of the room” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 20). Under the stranger’s studying glance, “for indiscernible reasons,” the narrator feels himself “blush” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 21). Watching the stranger’s interactions with another man, the narrator is “overcome with the sensations of touch, of my fingers and palms smoothing along some untouched body in some imagined and silent sun-filled room, overcome with the heat” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 21). The space of the waterfront bar at the piers allows for these interactions, but it also represents a kind of body in itself, which the narrator must leave as if escaping the hold of a lover: “I...push open the doors and release myself from the embrace of the room and the silent pockets of darkness and the illuminating lines of light” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 21-22).

In the narratives at the piers, memory is represented as moving in the rhythm of the tides. It carries a faint heightening sensation at first, suggesting that the narrator is turned on simply by moving and dwelling, while high on a drug, within the queer space of the piers:

Sitting in the Silver Dollar restaurant earlier in the afternoon, straddling a shining stool and ordering a small cola, I dropped a black beauty and let the capsule ride the edge of my tongue for a moment, as usual, and then swallowed it...the flat drift of sensations gathered from walking and seeing and smelling and all the associations; and that strange tremor like a ticklishness that never quite reaches the point of being unbearable. There’s a slow sensation of that type coming into the body...and riding with it in waves, spurred on by containers of coffee, into the marvelousness of light and motion and figures coasting along the streets. (Wojnarowicz 1991: 12)

While memory moves in tidal rhythm, as “the press of memory turning over and over,” the sensation of sex itself in the narrative is figuratively like a “great dark ship with hundreds of portholes pushing and smoothing against the tides,” or else it appears visually in the “film” of light he can see through the window screen during a sexual encounter (Wojnarowicz 1991: 13, 16).

The use of the term “loving” in the narrative occurs in relation to the queer body, in a series of figurative images that also refer to aspects of the American landscape. The images repeat and heighten qualities of accumulation and deterioration, just as they juxtapose various geographical locations in America: “In loving him, I saw small-town laborers creating excavations that other men spend their lives trying to fill....In loving him, I saw great houses being erected that would soon slide into the waiting and stirring seas” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 17). There is also attention to the permeability of structures, both physical and social, where the inside and outside converge or open to each other: “In loving him, I saw a cigarette between the fingers of a hand, smoke blowing backwards into the room, and sputtering planes diving low through the clouds. In loving him, I saw men encouraging each other to lay down their arms...I saw a hand in prison dragging snow in from the sill” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 17). Cinematic qualities also characterize this narrative description: “In loving him, I saw moving films of stone buildings” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 17). Finally, the tensions the narrator experiences between his interior life and his public exterior life are contended with and released in his acts of love: “I saw him freeing me from the silences of the interior life” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 17).

The last section of the narrative, “Losing the Form in Darkness,” addresses the piers as a permeable creative space where art and life collide. Wojnarowicz observes “vagrant frescoes painted with rough hands on the peeling walls,” in an entry he made in his journal after visiting the piers in June 1980 (Fales series 1.1.14, June 18, 1980). In a similar passage in the memoir, he describes these murals as, “huge...nude men painted with beige and brown colors coupling several feet above the floorboards (Wojnarowicz 1991: 22). Along with these murals there are smaller illustrations of “crayoned buddhas,” representing a form of spirituality that is combined with the sexual imagery (Wojnarowicz 1991: 22). The final description of the visual art in the

warehouses notes the literal permeability of the walls, where “a series of black wire-strewn holes pull apart the surface” produced by “crowbars and hammers” used to find “copper pipes and wires” to sell (Wojnarowicz 1991: 22). However, the porous, decrepit surface is also “filled” with the “floating faces” of queer figures with “high-boned cheeks and multicolored eyelids, a stream of hair touched by loving or by winds, small crudely drawn lanterns serving no purpose but to genie these faces from the vague surface of the plaster” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 22).

As the narrator continues his wandering, he finds moments when the bodies of men merge with the art on the walls, stuck, unchanging, in time: “briefly framed in the recesses of a room a series of men in various stages of leaning...flesh of the frescoes come to life: the smooth turn of hands over bodies, the taut lines of limbs and mouths” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 22). This merging of bodies and art also signals a gathering collectiveness and heightened physical interaction as more men emerge within the scene: “the intensity of the energy bringing others down the halls where guided by little or no sounds they pass silently over the charred floors. They appear out of nowhere and line the walls” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 22). A merging of historical eras and geographical locations is conveyed through the descriptive language. The men appear like “figurines before firing squads or figures in a breadline in old times pressed into history” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 22-23).

Wojnarowicz’s final description of the piers in “Losing the Form in Darkness,” renders the queer space ancient and static, caught in time. The narrator relates the denizens of the piers to “the eternal sleep of statues, of marble eyes and lips” with “arms corded with soft unbreathing veins” or “the wounding curve of ancient backs stooped for frozen battles” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 23). Life seems to dissipate from the piers in this moment, leaving a “face beneath the sands of the desert still breathing” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 23). This description is eerily similar to the

photograph that Marion Scemama took of Wojnarowicz near the end of his life when he knew he was dying of AIDS, titled *Last collaboration, May 1991*. In an interview, Scemama, a friend of Wojnarowicz's, recalls the process of taking that photograph, describing the precise instructions he gave her: "I took the camera, stood above him with his body between my legs, and photographed him from different angles....Then I realized he was giving me what he wouldn't be able to give me later: he had made me a witness to his death" (Scemama 2006:140).

During the AIDS crisis, Wojnarowicz writes a scene of cruising at the piers. In it the physical space of the piers is rendered as a fantastical, permeable, elemental place: "I'm walking through these hallways where the windows break apart a slow dying sky and a quiet wind follows the heels of the kid as he suddenly steps through a door frame ten rooms down" (1991: 64). The kid is not a representation of innocence, but he does seem to represent someone younger than the narrator, perhaps Wojnarowicz himself at a younger age: "His eyes make him look like he's starving for food or just feeling lust or else he's got the look of one of those spiritual types that hover on street corners" (1991: 65). The kid remains silent during the whole scene, even as the narrator is focused on expressing the experience of living with AIDS in America as a queer man. At one point the kid seems to represent life in the midst of death: "He turned and leaned up against the wall at a point where a crack in the roof let light pass through illuminating the wall and his head like some old russian [*sic*] icon of a saint in mausoleum darkness" (Wojnarowicz 1991: 65). This description conjoins the queer body with the structure of the piers.

Like the earlier narratives situated at the piers, the references to another historical period and geographical location have the effect of merging time and space. The narrator and the kid need to go into hiding to find space to connect: "I could feel his lips against mine from across the room, tasting reefer or milk on them as he disappears through a square hole in the ceiling"

(Wojnarowicz 1991: 65). The kid recedes “further back in the attic crawlspace” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 65). Qualities of deterioration and abandonment at the piers make them subject to fewer institutional or state controls. This produces an environment that allows for the protection of privacy within a queer counterpublic sphere but is also precarious in terms of safety. As the narrator describes: “I had to crouch in order to move through the narrow space, walking along the tops of spaced beams like a horizontal ladder so as not to trip and crash through the rotting tin ceiling” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 65).

The piers are also a temporary space, given specificity and value through the fleeting connections they allow. Wojnarowicz conveys their particular qualities and their significance within the anonymity of the vast American industrial landscape. By representing the piers in intimate detail, Wojnarowicz prevents them from vanishing from historical memory, even though the physical sites were torn down and the landscape was altered:

If viewed from miles above, this place would just appear to be a small boxlike structure like thousands of others set down along the lines of the rivers in the world; the only difference being that in this one the face of the kid starts moving up the wall past a window framing the perfect hazy coastline with teeth of red factories and an incidental gas tank explosion which sends flowers of black smoke reeling up into the dusk.
(Wojnarowicz 1991: 65)

This is another example of the visionary quality of the narrative perspective. Again, the passage of time is witnessed on a massive scale, producing a kind of simultaneity “of a minute vision” that merges the various different historical moments and geographical locations described in the memoir (Wojnarowicz 1991: 69).

“Set us free from our past histories”: Grappling with Destruction

Near the end of *Close to the Knives*, in a narrative written during the AIDS crisis, Wojnarowicz inserts earlier writing begun in the second half of 1980, pre-AIDS (Wojnarowicz 1991:187-188).

This earlier writing corresponds to an almost identical entry from his journal, written around the same time, and included in a collection, *In the Shadows of the American Dream*, published several years after he died (Wojnarowicz 1999:169). He describes going to the piers and witnesses himself there, as if detached: “There are times I see myself from a distance entering the torn, ribbed, garage-like doors of this place from the highway—I step away from myself for a moment and watch myself climbing around and I wonder, what keeps me going? Why is it these motions continue over and over, animal sexual energy?” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 187).

Wojnarowicz is preoccupied with conveying the gritty details of the queer space:

The smell of shit and piss is overwhelming; everybody uses this place as an outdoor toilet, getting fucked in the ass and then letting it loose in some spare corner.... To get further into the warehouse I have to breathe lightly and stay near the openings in the walls and walk quickly way back into the darkness to the farthest point where the walls open out to the river, and a concrete platform that seems to ride the waves, every so often crumbling and sinking as if into the raging seas. (Wojnarowicz 1991: 187)

In this passage that was written pre-AIDS, and then incorporated into a narrative written during the AIDS crisis, Wojnarowicz seems to perceive the queer space of the piers to be altered from the way it was when he first discovered it. Based on the description of the smell and refuse, the piers are more public and more frequently used than they were previously, and are now full to the brim with histories, some of which he wants and some of which he wishes would fall away. He imagines that the piers would burn down so that the memories they held could disappear. In this fantasy, queer space is transformed from a site that is remembered as pleasurable, attractive, and peaceful, to a container for what the narrator considers abject: “Deep in the back of my head I wish it would all burn down, explode in some screaming torrent of wind and flame, pier walls collapsing and hissing into the waters. It might set us free from our past histories. Once it was all beautiful rooms that permitted living films to unwind with a stationary

silence that didn't betray the punctuations of breathing, the rustle of shirts and pants sliding” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 187).

In his journal entry containing this same description, Wojnarowicz also includes references that are explicitly literary, as he describes his positive memories of the piers. He notes how “its once long ago beautiful rooms...permitted live films of Genet and Burroughs to unwind with a stationary kind of silence, something punctuated by breathing alone, and the rustle of shirts and pants sliding, being unbuttoned or folded back” (Wojnarowicz 1999: 169). The narrative conveys a shift from a space of paradise and even purity, where bodily expression occurs through acutely aesthetic silent movement and material texture, to a space that is ugly and repellant, polluted by the body's excretions, and existing in a changing state of deterioration and personal regret (Wojnarowicz 1991: 187). This final narrative featuring the piers could be Wojnarowicz's attempt to grapple with their ultimate destruction after they became more popular with the East Village art scene, and then attracted the presence of police (Carr 2012: 226-27). Eventually Piers 34 and 28 were both torn down in 1984 (Carr 2012: 227). His descriptions of the piers in this narrative reflect how the reality of AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s changed the way queer spaces and their histories were made visible.

Robert Sember uses Wojnarowicz's text, among works by other queer authors, to argue for an analysis of the piers as a space where gay men were able “to know” themselves and “become known to others” (2003: 214). He suggests that the piers disappearance during the AIDS crisis, as they were demolished and then replaced with a public park, “mirrored the devastation experienced by the community” (Sember 2003: 214). However, in studying Wojnarowicz's representations of this particular queer space, it is clear that there is more ambiguity in his treatment of the piers than Sember is accounting for. In Wojnarowicz's

narratives, the piers are not necessarily a queer space where one is safely known, or safely knowing. As Douglas Crimp writes, “Gay men were acutely aware of the piers’ dangers” (2010: 115). Wojnarowicz occasionally wishes for the destruction of the piers as a way to escape the past or at least move on towards the future. In grappling with the risks of the piers, Wojnarowicz represents them as a queer space that is fleeting and most vivid in its dissolution.

“I’m carrying this rage like a blood-filled egg”: Liberation through Anger

Close to the Knives can be read as an expression of radical queer negativity in terms of the affectivities that are privileged in the text. The narrator conveys rage at his own condition. He also shows anger towards the reader for being a voyeur of his suffering. Spite and impatience are directed at the homophobia of elected officials, religious leaders, and the dominant ideologies in America. Much of memoir is characterized by an intensity of feelings and thoughts expressed through vivid, visceral, graphic poetic language.

Wojnarowicz’s expression of radical queer negativity aims to fight queer silencing in the face of homophobia and AIDS. This notion of silence became a pivotal one for AIDS activists, including Wojnarowicz, who developed the slogan Silence = Death to call attention to the importance of queer voices in relation to the AIDS epidemic. His expression of radical queer negativity is also a means to stay visible despite fear, and assert his presence in the public sphere so that his experience will not be forgotten. He writes:

If something makes me uncomfortable or scares me or threatens me, I jump at it to confront it. The only way I can claim a territory for myself is to surround myself with it and get to understand its shape. Once I know its shape then it can’t affect me....To push through the illusion of law that says I’m unlawful, because of my desire and embrace the form my desire takes is my right as a body moving through space, to make rules for myself. (Wojnarowicz 1991: 198)

There is a sense of liberation in Wojnarowicz's emotional expression and unregulated speech. His ability to express his desires and preferences also has liberating potential in the context of a world that is repressive of queer identities and experiences. Wojnarowicz's expression of radical queer negativity becomes a defiance of grief unless it is accompanied by rage. It is also a defiance of silence in the face of death. As Maggie Nelson writes, in Wojnarowicz's memoir, "The 'art of being' was replaced by 'the art of survival'—or, when survival is no longer an option, with the art of dying—but not quietly" (2007: 214).

The narrator, as a queer man living with AIDS, is represented as inhabiting violent acts and desires as a form of retaliation, though they are presented as fantasy: "I wake up every morning in this killing machine called America and I'm carrying this rage like a blood-filled egg and there's a thin line between the inside and the outside a thin line between thought and action and that line is simply made up of blood and muscle and bone (Wojnarowicz 1991:161-62). His personal reflection through journal entries treats the past in altered or fragmented ways, which parallel the trajectory of his character development throughout the narrative arc of his memoir. An unflinching memory is a means of survival for Wojnarowicz. But in order to prevent trauma or the chaos of random and difficult circumstances from overwhelming his sense of self and identity, he is willing to revise the past. He does so in ways that produce sharper narratives, which are more effective as an activist statement and engaging as a work of literature. In his revisions of his memories of violence, he is the perpetrator rather than the victim. This narrative technique is similar to his use of self-mythology as an expressive mode of radical queer negativity. Both are used as his means of survival to grapple with difficult realities.

In a moment of hopelessness and despair, Wojnarowicz expresses a sense of being betrayed by the reader of his memoir. He feels he has become an object of the voyeurism which

he has invited through his narrative of dying. He pictures himself as a humiliated spinning ballerina:

These fragmented shapes called letters, the piling up of words in the pages of this book and the reader's eyeball at the voyeuristic microscope or telescope pouring over these sound-images and rattlings and bursts of thoughts and fuck you maybe I should be in some ratty ballerina outfit wearing the mask of a salivating mad dog twirling like some psychotic diva in a circular spot light all for your edification, for your discreet voyeuristic pleasure. (Wojnarowicz 1991: 201)

This passage expresses radical queer negativity because Wojnarowicz is striking out at the reader, engaging directly with his audience, while also expressing rage at the voyeurism directed towards his suffering. This is an example of Wojnarowicz's practice of counterpublic expression. He is intervening in the reader's ability to relate passively to the descriptions of the AIDS epidemic and other forms of suffering and injustice in the memoir. In the midst of anger he is urging political action and social protest.

“I lean towards him”: Creaturely Life as a State of Exception

Wojnarowicz's representations of queer spaces during the AIDS crisis hold creaturely significance. They are produced by his emphasis on making queer spaces visible and vivid in the face of homophobic obliteration or revulsion. In his representation of queer spaces while living with AIDS, part of Wojnarowicz's project seems to be a reanimation of his past before AIDS was part of his consciousness. His project is also to engage unflinchingly with the realities of his life as he witnesses his mentor, his lover, his community, and himself falling ill.

According to Wojnarowicz's vision, and his motivation for writing, an interruption of history as global capitalism would also be an interruption of heteronormativity which helps to fuel the rhythms of capitalist temporality. During the AIDS crisis, he revises and publishes early writing about the pre-AIDS spaces marked as outmoded detritus, such as the piers, which queers

infiltrated. These spaces were subsequently destroyed or taken away through gentrification as a function of American capitalism. Wojnarowicz's representations of queer space in this context can be understood as a form of reanimation through his documentation of what was once there, as well as his questioning and challenging of the capitalist system of replacement. By extension, in social terms, the narratives are an interruption of history emerging from Wojnarowicz's contemporary queer *Jetztzeit*. These states of emergency are represented as the experiences of being a homeless queer youth, and of living during the AIDS epidemic in the homophobic culture of America in the late twentieth century. He insists, through written reanimation, on the recognition of these experiences. This form of queer visibility and its counterpublic resonance are central to his work.

Wojnarowicz's concept of the "pre-invented world," which he hopes to interrupt and also envisions as plummeting towards total wreckage, has much to do with queer space. The spatial significance of the pre-invented world can be understood via Benjamin's notion of creaturely life against the background of his concept of natural history. Santner explains the meaning of natural history as "the paradoxical exchange of properties between nature and history that constitutes the material density of natural historical being" (Santner 2006: 17). According to this theory, "artifacts of human history tend to acquire an aspect of mute, natural being at the point where they begin to lose their place in a viable form of life (think of the process whereby architectural ruins are reclaimed by nature)" (Santner 2006: 16-17). Yet, "when an artifact loses its place in a historical form of life—when that form of life decays, becomes exhausted, or dies—we experience it as something that has been *denaturalized*, transformed into a mere relic of historical being" (Santner 2006: 17). In this "undead" space between real and symbolic death, natural history occurs (Santner 2006: 17). It is a queer space that Wojnarowicz returns to often in

the face of AIDS and in his vision of the future catastrophe of the “pre-invented world” as natural history progresses.

Wojnarowicz writes of the tension in relating to silent objects, and investing them with meaning and affective life, even in their “undeadness”:

I have the attraction to document things because with Peter, I saw how little was documented of him after he died. I saw all the photographs he left and how little of himself there was. . . . I’m also attracted to the idea of existence after death in the form of objects. I have a pair of Peter’s glasses, and they are the saddest things I have ever seen in my life. They’re sadder to me than his death was, or what the experience of his death was, because they became totally useless, and yet, they have all of this personality. They’re silent. (Interview 1989a: 181)

A central figure in Wojnarowicz’s life, Hujar was best known as an artist for his book, *Portraits in Life and Death*, published in 1976. In this book, he combined his photographs of mummies from the Palermo catacombs that he took in 1963, with photographs of his friends—artists, writers, performers, mostly queer—that he took in 1974-75 (Lippard 1994: 16). Wojnarowicz highlights his own sense of lost history regarding the work that Hujar had created, and his statement points to the importance of the queer archives, especially in the time of the AIDS epidemic, for documenting counterpublic queer history. Hujar’s queer act of bringing together ancient objects with the life of his friends in the present, produces a merging of past and present that is also found in Wojnarowicz’s memoir. I argue that this gesture is central to Benjamin’s conceptualization of the creaturely because of the reanimation it produces.

Wojnarowicz seems to share Benjamin’s belief in what Santner calls “the ceaseless repetition of...cycles of emergence and decay of human orders of meaning, cycles that are, for him...always connected to violence” (Santner 2006: 17). Like Benjamin, Wojnarowicz perceives allegory as a way to symbolize the “irremediable exposure to the violence of natural historical temporality” (Santner 2006: 18). I argue that Wojnarowicz understands “progression,” especially

in a homophobic society, in very similar terms to what Santner calls, “Benjamin’s own allegory of the angel of history staring helplessly at the wreckage of such ‘progress,’” (2006: 18).

Benjamin conceptualized this allegory when he envisioned his society reeling from the emergence of Fascism and the Holocaust” (2006: 18). For Benjamin, to dwell within this allegorical mode, “rendered a sense of life bereft of any secure reference to transcendence, of life utterly exposed to the implacable rhythms of natural history” (Santner 2006: 18). This sense is also prevalent throughout Wojnarowicz’s memoir.

In his narratives, Wojnarowicz depicts the piers, the deterioration of buildings in the Lower East Side and Meatpacking District, and the streets of Manhattan, as spaces of poetic allegory. For Benjamin, “Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things,” and they exist “beyond beauty” (*Origin* 178). In Benjamin’s conceptualization of poetic allegory, the body, like the mind, produce a “melancholic disposition” that is fundamental to the creaturely life (Santner 2006: 20). The narrator in Wojnarowicz’s text inhabits this creaturely life with melancholic presence, which means, according to Benjamin, to be immersed “in the life of creaturely things...Everything saturnine points down into the depths of the earth...the downward gaze is characteristic of the saturnine man, who bores into the ground with his eyes” (*Origin* 152). This characteristic of attentiveness to the ground is especially appropriate if we extend its meaning to include an attentiveness to the earth but also human and animal bodies, as well as qualities of the gritty, the dirty, the grotesque, and waste. These are all abject elements considered profane in a homophobic society, often linked in Wojnarowicz’s texts to queer sex and desire, and to queer spaces more generally.

Eventually for Benjamin, a melancholic disposition leads to “the point of alienation from the body,” where “the utensils of active life are lying around unused on the floor, as objects of

contemplation” (*Origin* 140). Similarly, Wojnarowicz concern with the queer body is a form of aesthetic contemplation. He notes: “It is the appearance of a portrait, not the immediate vision I love so much” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 9-10). In the references to the past and future in his memoir, the figure of the queer body becomes a site of sexual encounter and desire but also of allegory, which is where, according to Benjamin, “transitoriness and eternity confronted each other most closely” (*Origin* 224). This is a confrontation that, in Wojnarowicz’s narratives, leads to the final wreckage of the pre-invented world.

In *Close to the Knives*, when Wojnarowicz links the pre-AIDS narratives about his experiences of being a homeless queer youth with later narratives of his experience with AIDS, he has increasing access to “undead” space between real and symbolic death. Wojnarowicz argues that in this social and psychic space, America is propelled towards death by political and ideological forces, and the natural history of human civilization as it unfolds. The queer space of these historical conditions is produced by the subjectivity of the narrator who is witnessing and experiencing them. His vision incorporates a melancholic quality, but also a manic one, which Santner points out is an element included in Benjamin’s conceptualization of creaturely expression (Santner 2006: 80). This manic quality is most directly expressed in the heightened movement in Wojnarowicz’s text, particularly the New York streetscapes he inhabits. As Santner describes, “What distinguishes the allegorical sensibility is precisely its restlessness....The landscape of urban life is, in this view, experienced as phantasmagoric, as a source of ceaseless and vertigo-inducing excitations and shocks...a flooding of the mind by stimulation....This paradoxical mixture of deadness and excitation, stuckness and agitation, might best be captured by the term ‘undeadness’” (2006: 80-81).

According to Benjamin, a creaturely stance involves a bent posture in melancholic attentiveness to the ground's spectral ruins (Santner 2006: 86). In Wojnarowicz's descriptions of the piers, these spectral ruins include the bodily and profane. A creaturely stance also has a "cringe" that bends the back of the *creature*, that figure of pure exposure to the state of exception immanent to law" (Santner 2006: 86). In Wojnarowicz's text, the state of exception within normative regimes is figured as the expression and visibility of queer identity and desire, despite ideological systems that deny, or aim to obliterate and punish, queer existence.

The creaturely stance is depicted throughout Wojnarowicz's writing. In particular, Chisholm notes that Wojnarowicz's narrative, "Losing the Form in Darkness," which is situated at the piers, consistently features a pose of "leaning" and bent angles (1994: 94). In one sexual encounter described in the narrative, Wojnarowicz writes, "I lean toward him, pushing him against the wall...We're moving around, changing positions that allow us to bend and sway and lean forward into each other's arms" (1991: 16). In another sexual encounter, he describes, "I lean down and find the neckline of his sweater and draw it back and away from the nape of his neck which I gently probe with my tongue" (Wojnarowicz 1991: 17). On the walls, "huge" murals depict "nude men painted with beige and brown colors coupling several feet above the floorboards. Some of them with half-animal bodies leaning into the room's darkness" (Wojnarowicz 1991: 22). Through the doorways of various rooms at the piers the narrator sees, "a series of men in various stages of leaning" (Wojnarowicz 1991: 22). However, this leaning stance turns into loving and a kind of liberation in the midst of the narrator's sexual encounters at the piers. He states, "In loving him...I saw him freeing me from the silences of the interior life" (Wojnarowicz 1991: 17). For Benjamin, an interruption of the "capture and captivation" of the leaning stance is "the only possibility for genuinely new social, political, and ethical relations in

human life” and “for genuine creativity in these domains” (Santner 2006: 86). In Wojnarowicz’s text, this form of interruption, which occurs through queer love, is also a moment of potential liberation as freedom and visibility are generated by queer erotic experience.

Chapter Four: *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* by Samuel R. Delany

Measuring the Loss of Queer Space

Samuel R. Delany is the elder of the three authors I am discussing, born in 1942, seven years before Myles and twelve years before Wojnarowicz. A prolific and influential science fiction writer, Delany is also a respected teacher and cultural critic. In my study of Delany's work, I consider his memoir, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999). The text documents the queer space of the porn cinemas around 42nd Street and Times Square in the last quarter of the 20th century. Delany explores how these cinemas that showed predominantly heterosexual porn, facilitated queer space and counterpublic practices that were sexual and social in nature. Central to the memoir is the impact of the redevelopment of Times Square in the 1990s, which resulted in the dismantling and shutting down of almost all the cinemas in the neighbourhood. This spatial transformation becomes the focus of his texts. Delany places himself, as the first-person narrator, in the heart of the decomposing utopianism of the "new" Times Square at the end of the 20th century: "Because there's not enough intertwined commercial and residential variety to create a vital and lively street life, the neighborhood becomes a glass and aluminum graveyard, on its way to a postmodern superslum without even going through the process of overcrowding—abandoned before it's ever really used" (1999: 96). Through memory, he aims to reconstitute a queer space which, he argues has become the site of an erasure of queer history caused by redevelopment and gentrification.

For Delany, as for Wojnarowicz and Myles, writing about queer experiences that occupy a silent space in public discourse becomes a mode of discovery. The representation and analysis of these experiences are key in his counterpublic perceptions of the cinemas and their subsequent

demise: “This book is, then, an account, and in some passages an analysis, of how certain social surfaces functioned in interface with the men who paid a small price to utilize them” (Delany 1999: xvii). Delany understands that “ideologies” provide the meanings associated with the social and economic interactions and exchanges “recounted” in his essays (1999: xvii). His memoir is in part an attempt to unpack these ideologies and reveal how they function materially (Delany 1999: xvii). Similarly, Delany aims to “dismantle those discourses” that seek to categorize and discipline queer sexual practices as perverse or dangerous (1999: xiii). He suggests that “the space of discourse” is “imaginary” just like “the space where the class war occurs,” but it has “measurable and demonstrable effects on the real (i.e., political) materiality,” such as “the visible changes in a neighborhood, like Times Square” (Delany 1999: 119).

The memoir is divided into two companion essays which were originally written for separate projects, and, like Wojnarowicz and Myles’s texts, the essays share the overarching themes of queer freedom and visibility. The first essay, “Times Square Blue” was initially intended to document the activities and people on the corner of 42nd Street and 8th Avenue, along with “a few porn movie houses” that were permanently closed down by the city in October 1996 when the redevelopment project for the area was first introduced (Delany 1999: xv). Delany suggests that his text was inspired by the changes in the queer space he inhabited as a participant and witnessed as a writer and pedestrian. The expansion of the essay, at least 75 pages of manuscript, occurred in answer to a question from “a young woman editor,” who asked, after reading an early draft, “But what went on in those movie theatres, before they were closed? Let me see some of that?” (Delany 1999: xv). The second essay in the text, “...Three, Two, One, Contact: Times Square Red,” was written in the first half of 1998. Delany emphasizes the essay’s form, noting, “its appeal to theoretical discourse, its mosaic structure, and its range of attendant

topics” (1999: xvi). The analysis in this second essay focuses on why the queer space of the cinemas served an important function in Delany’s personal life, in the lives of those men who frequented it, and in American culture more broadly. The essay also turns a critical eye to the process in which “redevelopment” of Times Square happened, and the factors that motivated this process. Finally, his analysis considers the aftermath of the loss of this queer space.

The memoir as a whole is also an articulation of the state of emergency Delany encountered as a queer man in the last twenty-five years of the 20th century. He explains that the physical destruction of queer space he has witnessed around him was an extension of gentrification and heteronormative systems. Together these normative regimes use the notion of “redevelopment” to homogenize the urban landscape, to destabilize queer histories and undermine present and future queer counterpublics. The state of emergency in his memoir is the space of Times Square itself, the blue and red denoting flashing lights of an approaching emergency vehicle. Delany is calling attention to this emergency and delineating its source and impact. He explains that this state of emergency is also a condition of the repression that accompanied the backlash against public sex and queer spaces in the late-1980s and early 1990s: “Till 1985 public sex was largely a matter of public decency—that is to say, it was a question of who was or who wasn’t offended by what went on in public venues. Since ’85, for the first time, under a sham concern for AIDS, the acts themselves have been made illegal, even if done with condoms in a venue where everyone present approves” (Delany 1999: 91). Delany argues that this city policy controlling sexual activity parallels the closure of the porn cinemas: “In October ’95, after issuing endless contradictory statements about AIDS, the city gave all the theatres in the area a year—till this month, October ’96—to be out, so that renovations could get under way....all today are shut” (1999: 91).

Writing Queer Spaces of Intersectional Identity and Minoritarian Experience

As a prolific writer of science fiction, journalism, as well as literary and cultural criticism, Delany has experimented with multiple genres and developed an expansive body of work. Just as in Wojnarowicz and Myles's approaches, the crossing and blurring of boundaries between genres is characteristic of his writing. In an interview he comments, "Genres are never pure. Genres were never pure. The splits between them, while always noticeable, always oppressively there, are most important, most valuable by virtue of what they allow to cross over" (Delany, Interview 2000/01: 64). One of the major characteristics of his writing is an open and sometimes explicit discussion of queer experience and sexuality.

Delany emphasizes that the audience and publishing houses of science fiction were more open to the kind of work he wanted and needed to produce. He explains in an interview, "Literary publishing wasn't very accepting...while SF publishing was. They snapped me up on my first submission. And what they accepted was me, with all my socially-laid-down constraints, my limited talent, and my individual concerns, as manifested in what I wrote. And even during my first couple of years in the field, the genre tended to say to me: 'You can do what you want'" (Delany, Interview 1987: 43).

At the same time, he has also dealt with the repression and censorship of his work because of its queer content. Even after his science fiction novel, *Dhalgren*, published in 1975, sold more than a million copies, Delany "still struggled to publish his more controversial works" (Interview 2001: 2). In the mid-1980s, Dalton Books, which was the largest bookseller in America at the time, would not stock the work of science fiction and fantasy authors who had gay content in their work, and this included Delany (Interview 2011: n. pag). As a result, Delany's publisher, Bantam, had backed out of the deal to publish his fourth novel in the

Neveryon series or to reprint his older work. In 1984, this series had been the first work of fiction about AIDS to be published by a larger, mainstream press in America (Delany, Interview 2011: n. pag.). Delany then turned to smaller, independent presses to publish both his new work and his earlier books that Bantam was refusing to reprint (Delany, Interview 2011: n. pag.).

Born in 1941, Delany lived with his parents and sister in the middle of Harlem in a building above his father's business. He remembers that as a child his talents were recognized and he was encouraged by his family and his community (Taylor 2009). He explains that despite memories of his father's constant anger, this strong sense of family and community support are what "carried" him through school, through adolescence, and through his move to the Lower East Side as a nineteen-year-old with his wife at the time, poet Marilyn Hacker. He was used to people telling him, "You can do it" even as they were also viewing him as different because they suspected he was gay (Taylor 2009).

When Delany came out in the mid-1960s, he found himself wrestling with the language of experience, a problematic that emerged for him in terms of the question of representation. He had to figure out what discourse he would use to express his own thoughts and feelings about his life as a queer person. Delany was aware, like Wojnarowicz and Myles, that visibility and expression in the public realm were a means for making political change and also for sustaining safety in a hostile environment. In other words, visibility and expression had the potential to be queer spatial practices and constructs. As Delany notes: "Making ourselves known to as many people as possible was the only sane political alternative to end our greatest fear and oppression. And the more people who did it, the safer it would be for the rest of us. It's still not easy, but it's easier now than it was in 1960" (Interview 1986b: 4).

At the beginning of his career, the contradiction between how Delany experienced being gay and how he had represented these experiences to others raised questions for him about conveying personal experience and representing his self-identity in the public realm. Delany recognized that “When you talk about something openly for the first time...for better or worse you use the public language you’ve been given....I realized that my experience had been betrayed” (Interview 1986b: 11). In a documentary interview he states that he used “borrowed language” to talk about being gay when he first came out (Taylor 2009).

Delany realized that it was the books he had read by other writers that had influenced his own sense of gay identity. Apart from a few gay men in his community he had known as he was growing up, it was literature that had created the queer space he was familiar with. When he reflected on the gay authors he had read, “Petronius, Baldwin, Vidal, Gide, Cocteau, and Tellier,” he concluded, “They, at least, had talked about it....they’d at least essayed a certain personal honesty. And the thing about honesty is that all of ours is different. Maybe I just had to try my own” (Interview 1986b: 11-12). His commitment to being open about his experiences, which is aligned with his sense of awareness about the diversity of forms that honesty can take, is a constant thread in Delany’s writing, and a key component of the queer spatial practices in his memoir.

In Delany’s writing he is acutely aware of the differences between “public language” on one hand, and personal, private language on the other. He also considers the ways in which these different discourses intersect. As he maintains, “The constant and insistent experience I have as a black man, as a gay man, as a science fiction writer in racist, sexist, homophobic America, with its carefully maintained tradition of high art and low, colors and contours every sentence I write.

But it does not delimit and demarcate those sentences, either in their compass, meaning, or style. It does not reduce them in any way” (Delany, Interview 1986a: 73).

Intersectionality as identity and experience is central to his work because it reflects his own sense of self and the counterpublic perceptions he expresses. His memoir could be understood to produce what Ferguson has called “a queer of color critique,” defined by the understanding that, “Liberal ideology occludes the intersecting saliency of race, gender, sexuality, and class in forming social practices. Approaching ideologies of transparency as formations that have worked to conceal those intersections means that queer of color analysis has to debunk the idea that race, class, gender, and sexuality are discrete formations, apparently insulated from one another” (Ferguson 2004: 4).

Presence and Absence, Juxtaposition and Contact: Writing a Return

In his memoir, the narrative voice explicitly identified as Delany, moves between presence and absence. Sometimes the narrator chooses to foreground his role as author and sometimes he poses as an invisible or passive observer, simply channeling his memories and impressions into language. *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* is an autobiographical narrative that functions as a guise and also a study in self-revelation and creative self-portraiture. In the text, Delany develops a personal narrative alongside his political analysis about queer space. Throughout the first essay, Delany takes on the role of host, guiding the reader in and around the various sites in his memory. In the second essay, his role as guide is an intellectual one, leading readers through the realm of various discourses and critical analysis about the “redevelopment” of queer space.

Delany focuses retrospectively on scenes of social and sexual intimacy in the queer space of the porn cinema, depicting his experiences there as revelatory, pleasurable, plentiful, and

ordinary. Defining the neighborhood of Times Square and 42nd Street prior to development as a setting for queer counterpublic practices, Delany builds an argument for creating local, inclusive, diverse, micro-economic systems in urban neighbourhoods, that sustain affordability, sexual activity, safety, and vital cultural production. The ways in which Delany remembers queer space and the models of memory he produces through his narrative techniques are crucial to my reading of his work. The question of *how* Delany writes about queer space is therefore as significant as *what* he writes about it, in part because his representations are mediated by imagined possibilities.

Spatial concepts of contact and juxtaposition produce the shape of the text's narrative and reflect what Delany values most about the queer spaces of the porn cinemas: contact and juxtaposition. In his introduction, Delany explicitly states that his entire project is one of juxtaposition: "In different ways, at different focal lengths, along different trajectories and at different intensities, both pieces look at aspects of New York City affected by the Times Square Development Project of the last few years" (1999: xiii). Within the second essay there are often two columns of text running simultaneously down the page. One column acts as an ongoing narrative footnote that intersects with the main discussion, but it also carries its own trajectory. This dual narrative form reflects what Muñoz describes as the multiple forms of consciousness that "a minoritarian subject" sustains. These multiple forms are a means of locating oneself within the dominant culture and coming to a fuller understanding of self-identity. Muñoz writes that: "The fiction of identity is one that is accessed with relative ease by most majoritarian subjects. Minoritarian subjects need to interface with different subcultural fields to activate their own senses of self" (1999: 5). According to Muñoz, identities of queerness are predicated on a "twoness" or multiplicity, especially when one experiences a "queer...hybrid" identity: "Identity

markers such as *queer* (from the German *quer* meaning “transverse”)...are terms that defy notions of uniform identity or origins. *Hybrid* catches the fragmentary subject formation of people whose identities traverse different race, sexuality, and gender identifications” (1999: 31-32). Similarly, Ferguson explains how minoritarian subjects inhabit multiple locations: “Queer of color critique decodes cultural fields...from within...as those fields account for the queer of color subject’s historicity. If the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class constitute social formations within liberal capitalism, then queer of color analysis obtains its genealogy within a variety of locations” (2004: 4).

Both Muñoz and Ferguson define the “minoritarian subject” who is preforming “queer of color critique” as the agent doing the looking, observing, and witnessing. This is also a stance demonstrated by the narrator of Delany’s memoir. In these figurations, it is the narrative subjects’ awareness of their own multiple perspectives that allow them to transgress and begin to liberate themselves from oppressive, hostile structures of power.

The two extended essays in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* each contain a different tone and structure, but they both invest the queer spaces of porn cinemas and the street culture on 42nd Street and Times Square before redevelopment with social value and cultural significance. Delany discusses the differences between the two “extended essays,” addressing why he chose to juxtapose these “dual pieces” and asserting an explanation about his approach to form (1999: xviii). Of his own work he states, “All the commercial forces that yearn to reinstate those authorial unities of history, style, theory, and value are here at their most distressed” (Delany 1999: xvi). He suggests that it is the differences between the two essays that heighten their potential for generating new meanings about their shared subject matter (Delany 1999: xvi). For the reader, this comparison and contrast between the essays also yields a clearer awareness

of the particular aesthetic and narrative approaches used in each. Just as in Wojnarowicz and Myles's memoir, the construction of Delany's text is highlighted to reveal its seams.

Delany values juxtaposition, not only in terms of form and analysis, but also as a means of understanding the interactions that occur in the queer spaces he is discussing. Indeed, juxtapositions between people living different kinds of lives, and the revelations and connections revealed as a result of this juxtaposition, are a consistent theme in both of the essays in his memoir. They are best articulated in terms of Delany's concept of "contact"

A major focus of Delany's analysis in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* is the interfacing of private and public spaces and the relations that are generated as a result. For Delany, public space that produces queer sexual encounters is particularly important for encouraging forms of "interclass" contact (1999: 127). As he explains, "If every sexual encounter involves bringing someone back to your house, the general sexual activity in a city becomes anxiety-filled, class-bound, and choosy. This is precisely why public rest rooms, peep shows, sex movies, bars with grope rooms, and parks with enough greenery are necessary for a relaxed and friendly sexual atmosphere in a democratic metropolis" (Delany 1999: 127).

Desire is also a major element in Delany's representations of urban areas, and queer space in particular. He argues that it is "inseparable from the public contact situation," because "desire and knowledge (body and mind) are not a fundamental opposition; rather they are intricately imbricated and mutually constitutive aspects of political and social life" (Delany 1999: 168). Similarly, the occurrence of desire in a situation of "public contact" is what motivates intellectual inquiry for Delany (Delany 1999: 168). He insists desire is a fundamental force in various forms of contact, yielding significant occurrences whether "important or dramatic, material or psychological" (Delany 1999: 169).

Even as “contact” is presented by Delany as a fading form of social connection in New York City, he articulates in detail exactly what it is through the performative role of the narrative voice. The narrator performs his role explicitly in the first essay when he invites the reader to walk the streets with him, or creates a sense of being in the middle of the action on a street corner or in the porn cinemas. These performative aspects are communicated through the eloquence and vividness of his intellectual, conversational style. They are also present in the ways Delany shares examples from his own life of “contact,” through personal anecdotes that engage the reader. His use of long continuous sentences generates a tone of enthusiasm and excitement. As with Whitman’s free verse, these excessively long sentences produce an ongoing catalog of individuals and their actions. In describing life in the city, and the possibilities for contact, they spiral outwards and suggest a myriad of possibilities and potential pleasures (Delany 1999: 123).

The narratives in the memoir also stage forms of “contact” when the essays take a turn towards documentary reportage. At one point in the first essay, the narrator speaks to a taxi dispatcher, a shish kebab vendor, and two hustlers who still work along 42nd Street. He asks them all if they have noticed any impact, social or otherwise, from the changes to the neighbourhood (Delany 1999: 7-13). Each man has a different answer, and only the hustlers express a sense of unease or crisis about what has happened. Darrell says: “More police; and less money! People be scared now, you know what I’m sayin’? They stay home. Makes you want to get a regular job. They be hustlers out now, but they can’t stay in one place” (Delany 1999: 10-11).

The use of brief informal interviews and photographs complement Delany’s description of the queer spaces he observes and the people he interviews—emphasizing a style of documentary reportage. The narrative moves back and forth in time and space, juxtaposing

various ephemeral moments from the past as evidence to substantiate Delany's reflections about the cinemas and the queer intimacies they produced. The temporal movement of his narrative consistently begins in the present and then slides, often seamlessly, into the past, prior to redevelopment. For example, Delany begins the next passage: "In the autumn days of September and October, for those who recall the Deuce...walking along Forty-second Street from Eight to Seventh Avenue is an odd experience" (1999: 5). Then, without a pause or even a gesture of transition other than "once," the narrative enters a phase of recollection that is highly vivid and descriptive, bringing the past to the forefront of the narrative:

Once, more than half a dozen movie houses ran till near eleven P.M. Till ten, selling cameras, boom boxes, calculators, phone-answering machines, faxes and camcorders, guys lingering in doorways would ask you what you were looking for...Fast-food joints alternated with flashy clothing stores. On display dummies, striped, black, or polka-dotted fare sported gold chains and purple handkerchiefs blooming from breast pockets. In the middle of the block was Modell's Sporting Goods. Toward the Eighth Avenue end, sandwiched between the subway arcade and the Georgia Chicken Kitchen, a mini-grocery sold sodas and beer at only a dime per can more than you'd pay around the corner. (Delany 1999: 5)

Even as the narrative voice documents, it does not convey an objective tone. It revels in an explicitly queer subjectivity and addresses a queer audience directly. In his essays, Delany objectifies the men he observes in the street and the cinemas. For example, in his descriptions of the hustlers, the narrator identified as Delany, differentiates between "Darrell" who is "a good-looking man," and "Jeff" who is "scrawny and wholly unexceptional looking" (Delany 1999: 10, 12). At the end of the passages that detail his conversation with the hustlers, Delany speaks to the reader and assumes their potential interest in these men, sexually and empathetically, by explaining what the hustlers charge and whether they make a decent living: "For those interested in hard-edged figures: Darrell asks forty or fifty but will sneak into a peep show booth with you

long enough for one of you to come for twenty—and he’s a very busy man. Jeff starts at twenty—and he probably makes a more consistent living” (1999: 13).

Delany’s notion of return emerges as a way to envision the queer future and document the queer past. It is raised as a spatial question, addressing how safe, open, inviting “harbours” for human interaction and exchange could be located and established within the urban space of New York City. For Delany, in his focus on the future of queer spatial possibilities, a return does not mean accessing something identical or even similar to what was there before.

The narrative structure of the memoir also performs several kinds of return. At the end of the first essay Delany returns to the same point from which he began, at the site of Ben’s shoeshine stand (1999: 106-108). In the second essay, he offers “a recapitulation” of his narrative, in which he recites the three central arguments of his essays, word for word, as they appeared at the beginning (Delany 1999: 111, 121). This kind of return occurs again as he sums up the difference between “contact” and “networking” that he has spent a major section of the second essay exploring (Delany 1999: 139).

Delany also uses his second essay to reiterate the argument in the first essay, with denser historical and theoretical references. The approach is both temporal and spatial. The first essay’s narrative produces a sense of immediacy, as though the action is taking place in the moment or being recalled in the moment, and then relived in the mind and psyche of the narrator as memory. The second essay channels action into the reflective ideas, and represents moments as abstract conceptual occurrences rather than situations that can be represented visually in vivid terms. While “Time Square Blue” details the trajectory of the narrator’s own life history, “...Three, Two, One, Contact: Times Square Red” is transhistorical in its scope, crossing eras and geographical terrains in leaps and bounds. Spatially, the result is that the first essay

addresses specific physical sites in New York, and the second essay addresses abstract space while briefly referencing locations in New York City and other parts of the world that are relevant to Delany's argument. For example, in the second essay, Delany compares "the current transformation of Times Square" to Baron Haussmann's "rebuilding of Paris" in the mid to late 1800s (1999: 144). What these two transformations of urban spaces share, according to Delany, are the "many smaller events" that involved "the destruction of acres of architecture" and "numberless commercial and living spaces" (1999: 144).

"They've set gay liberation back": What Queer Freedom Means

In his memoir, Delany explores the ways in which queer spaces are crucial for freedom because they sustain and enable queer counterpublics. He states: "Social contact is of paramount importance in the specific pursuit of gay sexuality. The fact is, I am not interested in the 'freedom' to 'be' gay without any of the existing gay institutions or without other institutions that can take up and fulfill like functions. Such 'freedom' means nothing" (Delany 1999: 194). For Delany, the freedom "to 'be' 'gay' is meaningless if there is no access to the spaces that foster and sustain queer intimacies and counterpublic community in public urban areas.

Delany asserts that: "Many gay institutions...have grown up outside the knowledge of much of the straight world. But these institutions have nevertheless grown up very much *within* our society, not outside it. They have been restrained on every side. That is how they have attained their current form. They do not propagate insanely in some extrasocial and unconstrained 'outside/beyond,' apart from any concept of social responsibility" (1999: 194). He compares three different social constructions, "race, religion, or sexual preference" to argue that in each case the ability to participate in the social activities and practices associated with these

constructions is crucial (Delany 1999: 194). The reason this freedom matters most to Delany is because social constructions, like the experience of being gay, do not “come into being without their attendant constructed institutions” (1999: 194). He concludes with the notion that “tolerance—not assimilation—is the democratic litmus test for social equality” (Delany 1999: 194).

According to Delany, the measures taken to limit queer sex in “public” spaces are ideological, and also driven by economic interests. He presents these ideological and economic motives as parallel: “The city wanted to get the current owners out of those movie houses...and open up the sites for developers” (Delany 1999: 91). He explains that these changes to the queer spaces in New York City produce more limited freedom for queers. As a result, “they’ve set gay liberation back to a point notably pre-Stonewall. The talk now is of rezoning all such businesses over to the waterfront, while Forty-second Street proper will basically be a mall” (Delany 1999: 92). He points out that the gentrification and destruction of diverse urban landscapes has an osmotic and percolating effect throughout the entire city. With the destruction of the physical sites, “dies a complex of social practices, many of which turned on contact affecting over any year hundreds of thousands of men and women, many of them native to New York City, many of them visitors” (Delany 1999: 144). He argues that what accompanies these material and spatial developments are significant “legal” and “rhetorical” changes that reflect and express “a major shift in the discourse of sexuality, straight and gay, as we respond to changes in the architecture, commerce, and quality of life in New York City” (Delany 1999: 144-145).

In an essay published before his memoir, Delany stresses that along with queer spatial practices and constructs, queer freedom depends upon self-definitions of identity: “For me, Gay Identity...is an object of the context, not of the self—which means, like the rest of the context, it

requires analysis, understanding, interrogation, even sympathy, but never an easy and uncritical acceptance...its place is precisely in the politically positivist comedy of liberation we began with—but probably nowhere else (1996: 143). Like Wojnarowicz and Myles, Delany writes about his own minoritarian experience of defining his queer identity and how it is a way for him to open up the meaning of queerness as a category. In an interview he states:

What can happen when a writer enters one of these areas of silence is that, instead of defining the human by a reticence, sometimes we can bring readers to the notion that articulating what actually goes on within such silences—especially if we do it with sentences of the sort that you so enjoy—can reverse the process and start expanding the definitions of the human by including the material up till now excluded. The sexual—especially the large areas dismissed as ‘deviant sex’ and/or ‘public sex’—is simply another area of silence. (Delany, Interview 2004: 120)

For Delany, diversity in queer spaces is what helps to produce queer freedom. He repeatedly notes the benefits of “designing” spaces for “diversity” (1999: 177). He states that “the same principles of socioeconomic diversity” that older neighborhoods incorporated could be used as a model to “reproduce those multiform and variegate social levels to achieve like neighborhoods as ends” (Delany 1999: 178-79). He asserts that diversity can be designed to suit a whole range of desires, including the desire for public sex and trade sex: “At the human level, such planned diversity promotes—as it stabilizes the quality of life and the long-term viability of the social space—human contact” (Delany 1999: 179). Delany wants to replace the traditional redevelopment practices and gentrification processes in urban spaces, with policies that create and support diversity through population density, variation in property use, and affordable property (1999: G 168). He argues that this would create sites for sexual expression and counterpublic cultural activities that are inclusive and accessible. These spaces would be more beneficial for urban infrastructure than expensive, commercial, large-scale developments aimed at tourists (Delany 1999: G 168-69). Delany understands sex as being fundamental for city

planning because he argues it is a significant aspect of human experience (1999: 169). He asserts that diversity, including sexual diversity, produces less violence, and he claims the lack of targeted aggression in urban spaces “is among the most powerful factors constituting the freedom of action and thought—so often called opportunity—that small towns simply cannot proffer” (Delany 1999: 176).

Like Wojnarowicz and Myles, one of the meanings of queer freedom that Delany emphasizes in his memoir is the choice and opportunity to define himself and the genres he writes in, regardless of the assumptions of others. In an interview Delany conveys his experience of self-identity, like his notion of genre, in spatial terms of occupying multiple locations at once: “As a black man, I tended to straddle worlds: white and black. As a gay man, I straddled them too: straight and gay” (Interview 1986b: 4). These multiple locations allow him to understand juxtaposition and to embody dialectical experiences. At the same time, Delany challenges the notion that his writing is determined either by how his identity is perceived by others or how it is inculcated with social and cultural meanings: “The speaking subject (or, indeed, the writing subject) must always speak (or write) from a real, material, and specific position. But this position is just that: a position from which to observe, from which to speak, to listen, to read, to write. It represents neither a perimeter around a given set of subject matters, around a certain predictable content, nor a signature that will always be discoverable” (Interview 1986a: 73).

Delany concludes his memoir by talking about democracy as form of freedom. He argues that urban areas should be cut up into different beneficial “social relationships” (1999: 193). These arrangements, according to Delany, would make it safer, more comfortable, and more convenient for strangers to interact with each other: “I propose that in a democratic city it is imperative that we speak to strangers, live next to them, and learn how to relate to them on many

levels, from the political to the sexual....This is what politics—the way of living in the polis, in the city—is about” (1999: 193). Delany believes that projects like the redevelopment of 42nd Street are “based on the incorrect assumption that interclass contact is necessarily unsafe...and that its benefits can be replaced by networking” (1999: 193). However, for Delany, it is “interclass contact conducted in a mode of good will” that forms “the locus of democracy as a visible social drama,” and “must be supported and sustained by political, educational, medical, job, and cultural equality of opportunity” (1999: 198). This is what he calls “the lymphatic system of a democratic metropolis” (Delany 1999: 198). Its key characteristics “involve some form of ‘loitering’ (or, at least, lingering), and are therefore “unspecifiable in any systematic way” because “their asystematicity is part of their nature” (Delany 1999: 199). De Certeau defines a city as “an immense social experiment in lacking a place...the moving about that a city multiplies” (1984: 103). Delany argues that “place,” like queerness itself, is found in processes of motion and change, because that is what juxtaposition, curiosity, and difference produces: an impetus to keep changing one’s horizon of experience and understanding.

“Let’s go around the corner”: Remapping to Make Counterpublic Histories Visible

Delany’s memoir is used to record and preserve minoritarian experiences, and by extension, queer counterpublic perceptions and histories. This is how his memory work functions in the narratives of the text. The destruction of queer spaces around 42nd Street obliterates the landscape that Delany’s experience has mapped, so the only way for him to retrace or revisit these experiences is through a combination of imagination and memory. Through recollection and remapping of the queer spaces that no longer exist in the neighbourhood, he makes them visible. Delany’s focus is on specific people, places, and situations. These details are meant to

represent the past in the same way as a photo. He notes, with a sense of regret, that, “I often thought about taking photographs in the movies. But I never did. Verbal accounts such as this are what remain” (Delany 1999: 36).

Delany also defines the changes to Times Square and 42nd Street as “violent,” and makes their violence visible: “In order to bring about this redevelopment, the city has instituted not only a violent reconfiguration of its own landscape but also a legal and moral revamping of its own discursive structures, changing laws about sex, health, and zoning, in the course of which it has been willing, and even anxious, to explore everything from homophobia and AIDS to family values and fear of drugs” (1999: xiii-xiv).

The memoir incorporates figurative language to reveal the loss of queer spaces. Delany explains that the “redevelopment” of Times Square and the accompanying plans to “clean up” New York, have dismantled the queer spaces that provided him with “something no less necessary to...appetitive life than good food and fresh water” (1999: xviii). He begins his text with the inhospitable, and even uninhabitable present. He associates the violence that has been inflicted on the urban space of the Deuce to make room for large, corporate, capitalist enterprises, with other forms of racist violence and discrimination in America:

An order of menace now hung over a goodly portion of my sexual life. That menace was quite apart from the homophobia manifested today in everything from the violences inflicted on the minds of gay men and women by religious leaders like the Reverend Falwell (who, within a month, I have watched on television claim he can ‘cure’ homosexuality by bringing lesbians and gay men to Jesus), to the fatal violence meted out two weeks back on the beaten and broken body of Matthew Shepherd, bound to a fence on a cold Wyoming highway—not a full five months after the murder of James Byrd in Texas, dragged by a chain from the back of a truck for being black, and only days after pediatrician Barnett Slepian was shot to death in his home for performing abortions in Western New York State. (Delany 1999: xv)

He explains that bearing witness to these multiple forms of violence, and responding to them by making his own experience and analysis visible and effective in his text, are the generative basis

for the two essays: “Certainly my own fairly calm material life in a world which nevertheless contains such violences (in a city where gay-bashing crimes are up by 80 percent this year) is the ground from which the thinking in these two pieces has grown” (Delany 1999: xv).

Through personal accounts, Delany explores the ways in which the “redevelopment” of Times Square represented a gradual crisis for himself and the other people who frequented the area. Prior to redevelopment, it was a “surprisingly beneficial” area, where “the public could avail itself of the neighborhood” (Delany 1999: xx):

As a black gay male who had first set off from Harlem for Times Square one Sunday morning in 1957, more than a decade prior to Stonewall, with the specific goal of coming out and who, since 1960, had regularly utilized those several institutional margins transversing the Forty-second Street area in which gay activity thrived, I had to acknowledge with that early newspaper announcement of redevelopment that an order of menace now hung over a goodly portion of my sexual life. (Delany 1999: xv)

The changes he witnessed came as a shock because he had not expected them: “Like many young people I’d assumed the world—the physical reality of stores, restaurant locations, apartment buildings, and movie theatres and the kinds of people who lived in this or that neighborhood—was far more stable than it was” (Delany 1999: xiv). The crisis of loss erupts for Delany because once the queer space is gone, the activities that occurred there and the social ecology that sustained and nurtured them in ways he stresses were positive, also disappears.

Delany frames the redevelopment of Times Square, and the destruction of queer spaces this process precipitated, in terms of consequences for individual lives. After detailing various characters’ sexual quirks and intricacies, he explains what redevelopment meant for their activities and wellbeing. In doing so he shows how the queer space of the porn cinemas was crucial for queer quotidian life including pleasure and companionship. He offers an anecdote about a man known only as “Joey,” who goes from being “twenty-four and a two-hundred/three-hundred dollar-a-night hustling success, with more drugs and watches and diamond rings and

coke than he knew what to do with,” to “living on the street” as the “the whole neighborhood was shutting down and being bought up by land speculators” (Delany 1999: 42-43). The destruction to the queer spaces in the neighbourhood parallels Joey’s transformation: “In preparation for the longer and longer delayed architecture renovation, the drugstore shut, the comic book shop moved, the dry cleaners closed” (Delany 1999: 43). Delany concludes that Joey became “Joey-Who-Needs-a-Bath...just a grubby guy” (1999: 43). Delany’s conclusion is that without social spaces in which to practice and develop sexual expression and interaction, human lives are restricted and even harmed as a result.

Delany seems driven to describe the past and make it visible in order to indicate the degree of loss implicated in the destruction of queer spaces. He emphasizes that those who once populated Times Square to socialize, shop locally, have sex, and cruise, have all disappeared. After describing in vivid terms who and what was there, he states: “Today they’re gone” (Delany 1999: 5). As if to accentuate the departure of everything that came before the redevelopment, he adds that “even” the work of artists who intervened in the public space after redevelopment had begun, has now disappeared. With the beginning of redevelopment there was a limbo period of steady exodus where artists took over the “silent marquees,” replacing life with art, but now their work too has “been dismantled” (Delany 1999: 5-6). This process of loss is consistently framed in the narrative through a seamless transition from present to past that conveys the intensity of its impact: “Across the street office workers are still in and out of the twenty-three-story Candler Building. But the guys in their tank tops and baseball caps who used to hang out toward the Eighth Avenue end, in front of Ben’s portable stand, walking up beside you as you pass (sotto voce: ‘Loose joints, Valium, black beauties...’Lides...Sen’similla...’or whatever was going on the street that day), are gone” (Delany 1999: 7).

Delany explains that the changes to Time Square have altered his own life, making it “personally, somewhat more lonely and isolated. I have talked with a dozen men whose sexual outlets, like many of mine, were centered on that neighborhood. It is the same for them. We need contact” (1999: 175). He argues that “the erosion of contact” is “an instance of a larger trend” that always involves “desire and/or fear of desire,” even if it does not involve sex (Delany 1999: 175). He thinks the challenge to this trend would be “education” about cities that is not totalizing in terms of problems or solutions. He argues that “we have to educate people to look not so much at social objects and social monuments but to observe, analyze, and value a whole range of human relationships” (Delany 1999: 177). This education is necessary, according to Delany, because the public’s perception has a powerful impact on the policies and deals that are made between government and business (1999: 177).

Delany makes visible the ways in which racism is a primary factor in the dismantling of the queer spaces in the neighborhood and is also embedded in the dominant discourses used to justify redevelopment. When Delany talks about the changes to Times Square in an interview thirteen years before his text was published, he notes that the Times Square neighbourhood prior to redevelopment “has traditionally been a center for *much*...of New York City’s homosexual activity. And much of that activity is among black and brown working-class men. Indeed, in the area slated for demolition and replacement of offices stands one of the city’s most established black gay bars: Blue’s” (Interview 1986b: 19). Delany explains that at the time of the interview, a cover story in the *Village Voice* about upcoming redevelopment did not discuss the fact that the neighbourhood was a centre of social and sexual activity for queer men or that most were also men of color (Interview 1986b: 19).

Delany's motive for writing his memoir is driven by the realization that the marginalization and invisibility of the queer spaces allow them to be ignored and obliterated. He specifies that these queer spaces absorb "a certain social excess...socially beneficial to some small part of it (a margin outside the margin)," which then "allows them to be dismissed" (Delany 1999: 90). This dismissal occurs within a rhetorical political debate, and also as the queer spaces are "physically smashed and flattened," because if they are understood to be "relevant only to that margin," then "No one else cares" (Delany 1999: 90). The visibility he aims to produce insists on the social necessity and value of these spaces by detailing how they function and the beneficial experiences they generate.

Delany understands that queer representation and visibility are necessary for survival in a homophobic world. He associates the porn cinemas with individual lives and interests—spaces inhabited by specific individuals. He argues that "in a democracy," to claim certain institutions are marginal and therefore worthless or replaceable "is not an acceptable argument. People are not excess. It is the same argument that dismisses the needs of blacks, Jews, Hispanics, Asians, women, gays, the homeless, the poor, the worker—and all other margins that, taken together (people like you, people like me), are the country's overwhelming majority, those who, socioeconomically, are simply less powerful" (Delany 1999: 90).

The tools for creating visibility are varied for Delany. Some of them emerge from his intellectual analysis. Part Two, "Three, Two, One, Contact: Times Square Red" began as a lecture he was invited to give in an academic context (Delany 1999: xvi). According to Delany, "Its appeal to theoretical discourse, its mosaic structure, and its range of attendant topics" are what differentiate it from Part One (1999: xvi). Delany understands that visibility depends on language. The "concept of discourse" and its "constant renovation" become key for the second

essay, particularly in terms of his focus on creating “new institutions” through “a necessary critique of those institutions” (1999: 112).

The narrator of the memoir seems determined to transport the reader to the street and allow us to be present there. From the beginning of the first essay, the reader is addressed directly as if we are right beside him. Delany states invitingly, “Let’s go around the corner” (1999: 5). The essay also concludes with another direct address. When discussing “four diminutive dives, all within walking distance” of 42nd Street, the narrator states “Only one is officially a gay bar. (We’ll visit that one later.)” (Delany 1999: 97). In reconfirming that the reader is meant to be there beside the narrator, in medias res, on the street, the narrator’s tone explicitly asserts the close proximity and familiarity of his memories: “You recognized a third of the faces you saw, and they recognized you...you had a few passing acquaintances” (Delany 1999: 32-33).

In its style and approach, the narrative voice periodically reflects the voices of the men who used to hang around the Deuce, working and socializing there, the “guys lingering in the glass doorways” of movie houses, convening the localized markets of objects and sexual encounters, who’d “cajole, ‘No, come on in! Come on inside. We’ve got it for you!’” (Delany 1999: 5). In using their style of address, it is as though the narrator is conjuring their ghosts through his memories of the representations of queer spaces that have vanished.

“Interlocking systems and subsystems”: Queer Spaces of the Porn Cinemas

The queer spaces of the porn cinemas represented in *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue* are shown to be predicated on an alternative economy of exchange. The cinemas sell access to public sex spaces for the price of a movie ticket, and sex workers use the theatre to sell their trade. The

queer space also incorporates the drug trade, “Furthest down the block from the Capri, the Venus was generally a little too scroungy even for me. The drug activity there was often so high as to obliterate the sex activity. Still, on and off through the years, it provided me with a couple of regulars” (Delany 1999: 36). Delany also describes the heterogeneous local economy of the neighborhood and its vibrant theatre scene which he argues was produced by queer space and opportunities for public sex in the area.

The cinemas are a covert queer space. Often participants engaged in queer spatial practices do not explicitly define them as queer acts, but Delany’s analysis demonstrates that the experiences in the cinema are queer in social, sexual, and counterpublic terms. Within the gay community, the cinemas, like the bathhouses, were well known as queer sexual spaces. Delany argues that the theatres on 42nd Street had always been “a gay sexual cruising ground,” and the move to show heterosexual porn films increased or at least maintained this practice (1999: 19). Yet the space was also dominated by a heterosexual visibility. He describes that “over thirty years,” he “saw hundreds and hundreds of [heterosexual porn films] with a largely straight male audience sitting in the dark around me” (Delany 1999: 76).

Delany argues that the heterosexual porn shown in the cinemas interfaced with forms of queer visibility and queer desire. He describes one of the actors as “at once supermasculine and all but androgynous” so that “the heterosexual male audience was fascinated by this guy in whom the usual boundary between the desire to be him and the desire to possess him was set so intriguingly (in male heterosexual terms) askew” (1999: 76). He argues that in fact, based on what he witnessed over thirty years in the cinemas showing heterosexual porn, “this ambiguity seems the sine qua non for any sort of popular success as a male porn star” (Delany 1999: 77). As a kind of text, the films “presented a world in which a variety of heterosexual and lesbian acts

were depicted regularly, even endlessly, in close-up detail. The only perversion that did not exist in their particular version of pornotopia, save for the most occasional comic touches (and even those would get a groan from the audience as late as '86 or '87), was male homosexuality. But its absence from the narrative space on the screen proper is what allowed it to go on rampantly among the observing audience” (Delany 1999: 79).

A characteristic of queer space that is emphasized more in Delany’s memoir than in Wojnarowicz and Myles’s texts, is the diversity of the participants at the cinema. Delany describes the class and cultural diversity of these spaces:

The population was incredibly heterogeneous...I’ve met playwrights, carpenters, opera singers, telephone repair men, stockbrokers, guys on welfare, guys with trust funds, guys on crutches, on walkers, in wheelchairs, teachers, warehouse workers, male nurses, fancy chefs, guys who worked at Dunkin Donuts, guys who gave out flyers on street corners, guys who drove garbage trucks, and guys who washed windows on the Empire State Building. (1999: 15)

As a queer space, the porn cinemas are also associated with utilitarian, pragmatic, inclusive qualities: “There are many men, younger and older, for whom the ease and availability of sex there made the movies a central sexual outlet” (Delany 1999: 16). He maintains that, “Furtive business men were just not the audience in these places. The guys who wandered in were the working stiffs—the ones who came during the day, between jobs or on their day-off—most from age twenty-five to fifty” (Delany 1999: 19). Notably, all of these descriptive details are delivered in the past-tense, suggesting they no longer exist.

Delany talks about how the queer spaces of the cinemas speed up activities that often take longer in other locations, making them more efficient in terms of meeting and engaging sexually and socially than a bar: “The sex movies were places where, for the admission price, if you knew what you were looking for and weren’t too choosy, you could be in and out in forty minutes, more or less satisfied,” while “bars are leisurely places where one passes an afternoon, and

evening. You go there to meet people. To talk. If you're lucky, sometimes you'll find someone you like well enough to go home with" (Delany 1999: 92). On the other hand, he suggests it is possible to spend hours, losing track of time in the cinema, just as someone may experience a sense of lost time in the midst of a heightened emotion: "Occasionally men expected money—but most often, not. Many encounters were wordless. Now and again, though, one would blossom into a conversation lasting hours, especially with those men less well-off, the out-of-work, or the homeless who had nowhere else to go" (Delany 1999: 15).

Delany places importance in constant, plentiful sexual activity in public. In the context of Berlant and Warner's discussion of sex in public, his representations of queer space can be understood as counterpublic because they contradict the heteronormative "structural differentiation of 'personal life' from work, politics, and the public sphere" (Berlant and Warner 1998: 193). Delany's approach challenges the presupposition that intimacy is linked "only to institutions of personal life, making them privileged institutions of social reproduction, the accumulation and transfer of capital, and self-development" (Berlant and Warner 1998: 193). At the same time, in Delany's assertion that public sites of intimacy hold equal value to private sites, he acknowledges that "intimacy, controlled and contained only in the personal, is always already publicly mediated" (Berlant and Warner 1998: 193). In his memoir, Delany intervenes in the ways "heteronormative conventions of intimacy block the building of nonnormative or explicit public sexual cultures" (Berlant and Warner 1998: 193).

The porn cinemas are represented as a liminal space, and as erotic sites of shadows and shelter. The layout allows for seeing and being seen, but also for concealment behind seats and in darkness. The fact that there are rows and balconies, organizes movement across the room in a

predictable way, but also allows for stillness. Delany discusses the details of the lighting, the sexual acts performed, and the etiquette of interactions in the cinema:

From ten in the morning till midnight you could enter and, in the sagging seats, watch a projection of two or three hard-core pornographic videos. A few trips up and down the aisle while your eyes got accustomed to the darkness revealed men sitting off in the shadows, --or, sometimes, full out under the occasional white lights...if someone hadn't stood up on the seat and unscrewed the bulb. Sit a seat away and you would either be told to go away, usually fairly quietly, or invited to move closer (if only by the guy's feigned indifference). Should he be one of your regulars, you might even get a grin of recognition. (Delany 1999: 15)

He explains the protective role that the queens would often play as they sat "clustering in their corner of the theatre" and "now and again, singly or in pairs, would forage out to check the side seats, the balcony, the front rows, and who were quick with their warnings" (Delany 1999: 33).

He describes the men in the cinema as if he is reading a map and trying to make the memory of these men as vivid as possible through their specific location: "I glanced at the young guy, two row below and a few seats to the side" (Delany 1999: 21). Delany notes how men inhabit and occupy the queer space of the cinema, even occasionally using the site as a literal dwelling or home:

A homeless man at least in his late seventies, possibly in his eighties, slept in a right-hand seat of the Venus's balcony...Finally I realized, quite outside of the sex or drugs, he lived there—permanently. He left the theatre only for the few hours during the night it closed for cleaning. He was there two or three days before the door of the Venus was boarded over and chained. Three weeks later I saw him in his tweed cap and ragged jacket, wandering along the street, eyes squinting in his wrinkled face, as though the wan Eighth Avenue sun was simply and permanently too bright. (1999: 58)

Delany's argument asserts that "the relation of commercial sex to noncommercial sex was intricate and intimate" in the queer space of the cinemas (1999: 146). Yet he underlines the point that the loss he has experienced when the cinemas were destroyed is that of non-commercial sexual activity and social connection, which he refers to as "the dissolution of that

80 percent where my own sexual activity and that of many other gay men were largely focused” (1999: 146).

In Delany’s description of the cinema, the men in the audience seem to appropriate time for their own purposes. Some spend hours engaged in activities that are separate from the rest of their lives. To appropriate without dominating is a dynamic of the queer intimacies in the porn cinema, where the space itself allows the men to possess each other temporarily. Such appropriation may also involve the exchange of money for sex in the context of queer trade.

Delany suggests that because the cinemas are almost always open, they facilitate consistent relationships over time. Because of the many men frequenting the cinemas they became a meeting ground and were sites in which strangers could interact and get to know each other. As Delany writes, sometimes he invited someone to his house “for breakfast,” or “took him home,” even though in the case of one lover, “Bobby,” he “didn’t know where he was from, what his last name was—and was unclear on his first” (1999: 39, 48).

In many of Delany’s descriptions of the queer intimacies in the cinemas, there is also a quality of propinquity which Michael Sorkin defines as, “Accidental encounter...produced by the character of urban access. One of the by-products of density and adjacency is a continual testing of access. Propinquity—the ongoing legibility of adjacencies—always harbors a testing function and the power to reveal the limits of urban boundaries” (Sorkin 1999: 6). Delany seems to be at ease with the randomness of the contact in the queer space of the porn cinemas, and appreciates the kinds of relations that this element of chance provides: “Some of what was in the old Times Square worked. Some didn’t work. Often what did—about, say, the sexual activity (and, despite the horror of the planners, much of it did: we have too many testimonies to that

effect by both the customers and the sex workers)—worked by accident. It was not planned. But this does not mean it was not caused, analyzable, and (thus) instructive” (1999: 161).

In their article about public sex, Berlant and Warner argue that “Urban space is always a host space. The right to the city extends to those who use the city” (1998: 205). The theatre itself is a host space for the men who visit it, and in its openness it reflects the public space of the city where so much of what happens is by chance, and yet, especially for writers like Delany, fascinating and worthy of documentation.

Delany’s representations of the social and sexual relations in the queer space of the porn cinema also reflect Sorkin’s notion of “giving ground,” as an intimate gesture of attentiveness and connection. Delany argues that the consistency of the queer space of the porn cinemas as a gathering place also created the basic structure for long-term relationships, and even a sense of community:

A glib wisdom holds that people like this just don’t want relationships. They have ‘problems with intimacy.’ But the salient fact is: These were relationships. In Tommy’s case, in Gary’s, and in several others they were relationships that last years. Intimacy for most of us is a condition that endures, however often repeated, for minutes or for hours. And these all had their many intimate hours. But, like all sane relationships, they also had limits. (1999: 40)

Sorkin maintains, in terms similar to Delany’s notion of “contact,” that “propinquity—neighborliness—is the ground and problem of democracy” (Sorkin 1999: 4). Therefore, to give ground is to recognize the neighbor in shared spaces of the city where there is a “liquidity of association that characterizes urban life....The currency of propinquity is exchange, the most vital measure of the city’s intensity” (Sorkin 1999: 4).

As Berlant and Warner point out, capitalist and heteronormative ideologies “presuppose a structural differentiation of ‘personal life’ from work, politics, and the public sphere” (1998: 193). In this framework, intimacy is linked “only to institutions of personal life, making them

privileged institutions of social reproduction, the accumulation and transfer of capital, and self-development” (Berlant and Warner 1998: 193). This is despite the fact that intimacy, “controlled and contained only in the personal, is always already publicly mediated” (Berlant and Warner 1998: 193). The effect of this supposed separation of intimacy from public life makes intimacy seem irrelevant or merely personal, even while “heteronormative conventions of intimacy block the building of nonnormative or explicit public sexual cultures” (Berlant and Warner 1998: 193).

I argue that “sex mediated by publics” which Berlant and Warner refer to in counterpublic sexual culture, including queer spaces such as the porn cinemas Delany represents in his text, can be understood in terms of spatial situations of unconditional hospitality. These exchanges of unconditional hospitality thrive in public space, which is defined by Anne Dufourmantelle as “a place originally belonging to neither host nor guest, but to the gesture by which one of them welcomes the other” (Dufourmantelle 2000: 60, Berlant and Warner 1998: 187).

The porn cinemas were a counterpublic social institution that allowed Delany to figure out what it meant to be gay. He insists that the queer spaces they provided were the context in which he made the transition from his youth into adulthood: “It was not a static period. Energies, interests, and the workings of the body shift...But more than one person grew up with the pornographic sex theatres” (Delany 1999: 80).

One of his main points in the memoir is that the porn cinemas, as queer spaces, were highly organized. To dismantle them and contribute to an erasure of their significant history, obscures the benefits they provided to men involved in queer activities. Prior to their destruction, Delany defines these spaces as “complex interlocking systems and subsystems” of exchange (1999: xx). They also hold a fragile quality despite the vivid, heightened aspects he

attributes to them. He emphasizes the social interactions and juxtaposition these spaces allow for, and in particular their public nature, shaped by utility, accessibility, as well as the foibles and confusions involved in human relations: “The idea that all that is going on was ugly and awful is as absurd as it would be to propose that what was there was only of one moral color....Precisely at the level where the public could avail itself of the neighborhood, some of those subsystems were surprisingly beneficent—beneficent in ways that will be lost permanently unless people report on their own contact and experience with those subsystems” (Delany 1999: xx).

Delany works to emphasize the functional, socializing aspects of the queer spaces he is writing about, “Were the porn theatres romantic? Not at all. But because of the people who used them, they were humane and functional, fulfilling needs that most of our society does not yet know how to acknowledge” (1999: 90). As Halberstam points out, counterpublics “are spaces created and altered by certain subcultures for their own uses” (2005: 186). Delany argues that these uses as counterpublic practices are no different than, or at least are relative to, “any other social institution that is now, or was once, decried from one podium, pulpit or another” (1999: 198). What they have in common is that they are all “within the social; they are the social,” requiring “social intelligence in their administration,” and “always already in tension with other institutions” (Delany 1999: 198). As counterpublic practices in public space, they have also “required more or less vigilant protection as a set of freedoms” (Delany 1999: 198). Similarly sexual services such as “prostitution...or cruising for sex,” whether gay or straight, are no different from “any number of other forms” of interclass contact, according to Delany (1999: 198-199).

Delany explains that the porn cinemas serve a socializing function of civility and democracy that is crucial for a city. He states that “Public sex situations are not Dionysian and

uncontrolled but are rather some of the most highly socialized and conventionalized behavior human beings can take part in” (Delany 1999: 158). He specifically refers to these queer spaces as “social institutions” which he considers “as much a part of my growth and maturation as any other institution in the city” (Delany 1999: 89). Berlant and Warner concur that, “Gay men have come to take for granted the availability of explicit sexual materials, theatres, and clubs. This is how they have learned to find each other, to map a commonly accessible world, to construct the architecture of queer space in a homophobic environment, and, for the last fifteen years, to cultivate a collective ethos of safer sex” (1998: 191). Berlant and Warner argue that if heteronormativity receded: “Nonstandard intimacies would seem less criminal and less fleeting” (1998: 199). However, with the influx of gentrification and its normative regimes in the urban space of New York, intimacy is frequently privatized and “segregated” from “discourse contexts that narrate true personhood such as citizens, workers, or professionals” (Berlant and Warner 1998: 199). Delany’s text seeks to reintroduce the notion of sexual citizens in a queer polis as a viable way to conceive of urban culture.

Beyond the literal queer spaces located around 42nd Street and Times Square prior to redevelopment, the area also functioned as an imaginary queer space in American culture. Delany discusses how this imaginary version of the Times Square relates to the decision to dismantle and “redevelop” the neighborhood. In both essays, Delany contends that “major redevelopment” along the Deuce produced “major demolition, destruction, and devastation in what had established itself not only in the American psyche, but in the international imagination, as one of the world’s most famous areas” (1999: xiv). The way in which the area existed in the public imagination prior to redevelopment is significant because it informed how the area was redeveloped. While dominant political voices claimed that the area needed to be changed in

order to be improved, Delany notes that there was also “much concerted public disapproval and protest” about this treatment of the neighborhood (1999: xiii). He interprets that the fame of the area was based on its association with “the illicit and the perverse” along with its reputation as a major cultural centre for film, entertainment, and theatre such as Broadway (Delany 1999: xiv-xv). As an abstract idea or fantasy, The Deuce produced and contained elements of human experience and expression that were celebrated as art and entertainment within the wider culture. Yet it was also imagined to contain corresponding elements, largely to do with queer sexuality, which were criticized and denied, and led to the neighborhood being dismantled. This juxtaposition is an important one for Delany’s argument, as he analyzes the mutual existence of both pride and shame within American culture when it comes to sexuality.

Delany clearly states that the negative aspects of queer space in the Times Square area were “awful” because of “the illegal drug traffic that accompanied it, that worked its way all through it, and that, from time to time, controlled much of it. The mid-eighties saw an explosion of drug activity, focusing particularly around crack” (Delany 1999: 158). Delany believes that the drugs in the neighborhood were “*a direct result* of the economic attack on the neighborhood by the developers...in their attempt to destroy the place as a vital and self-policing site, as a necessary prelude to their sanitized site” (1999: 159). The new Times Square excludes groups that previously utilized it as their space. Delany talks about this change in terms of class assimilation, but it could also be extended to refer to an assimilation of queerness in terms of heteronormativity: “The New Times Square is envisioned as predominantly a middle-class area for entertainment, to which the working classes are welcome to come along, observe, and take part in, if they can pay and are willing to blend in” (1999: 160).

“Social problems to be socially solved”: Violence in Queer Spaces

Gender roles and representations of women emerge in this text as a key aspect of Delany’s representations of queer space. He fails to fully consider how the conditions of sexual violence are produced. At the same time he assumes that expressions of gay male sexuality are the standard for liberated queer sexuality. He also dismisses the possibility that queer women do have contact spaces for social and sexual intimacy and have formed counterpublics in New York during the same period in which he writing his text—simply because he is not aware of their existence. These gaps in the representation of women’s experience and sexualities in his text weakens his project to create and foster queer spaces for all genders. Even though he deliberately includes the category of gender as part of his analysis of queer contact and public sex spaces in the neighborhood around Times Square, his analysis is ineffective at addressing the issue of violence against women in relation to queer space, or the queer spaces that women occupy. As a result, and clearly despite his intentions, “Women are tellingly absent” as Halberstam points out, “from Delany’s...revolutionary account of sexual subcultures” (2005: 15).

In the public sex spaces that Delany defines as significant and beneficial for queer culture and society as a whole, including for the liberation of women, the threat of sexual violence keeps women away. It is not that these spaces or “institutions” as Delany calls them, produce that violence. Nor is the violence and the misogyny that accompanies it produced by the porn on the screens—although it is sometimes reflected there. Rather, the sexual violence in these public sex spaces is produced by the way patriarchy currently functions as a structure of power. Delany tries to reconcile the problem of gendered violence several times throughout his memoir but he does not confront patriarchy as a primary cause.

Delany acknowledges that women entering the queer space of the porn cinemas to participate as “gay, straight, or bi,” might experience fear for their physical safety and wellbeing in relation to men (1999:32). However he does not explore what produces the context for this fear, nor does he take it seriously as an experience. Instead he suggests that women’s fear of sexual violence stems from their preconceived expectations of danger in relation to the unknown. When his friend Ana, who visited the porn cinema with him, says she would not go back because “I was scared to death”, he dismisses her reaction outright (Delany 1999: 30). He calls her perception and intuitive sensation that she was not safe, a “fear of the outside that Ana bought within” (Delany 1999: 32).

Delany values and privileges personal experience, anecdote and critical perception throughout his text when they are his own. However, when they are expressed by Ana he does not consider them valid, and he wants to “put aside” her perceptions and experiences (Delany 1999: 32). In fact, he is content to define his whole discussion of women’s experiences in spaces of public sex through his impressions of only one woman’s experience. He also incorporates what other men perceive about women’s experience: “With Ana I have all but exhausted my firsthand material on women visiting the sex movies—though other men have told me similar talks about taking women friends with them—and, however arbitrary, that’s what I have decided to restrict the material to for this first piece” (Delany 1999: 32).

Similarly, Delany does not engage in an analysis of how the effects of misogyny, like racism, resonate through our social interactions and institutions. He refers vaguely to this analysis simply as “arguments,” and instead concludes that violence or the threat of violence against women in these public sex spaces are “just...social problems to be socially solved” (Delany 1999: 32). For him, “the sex movie houses—the theatres that showed straight porn and

encouraged gay sex in the audience” were not what he thought of or experienced as dangerous (Delany 1999: 32). While this is a valid point, it should not stand in for everyone’s experience or be used to dismiss those who do not share it.

The need to dismantle the structures of power that allows violence against women to continue is aligned with Angela Davis’s emphasis on the structural production of racism in “Political Prisoners, Prisons, and Black Liberation,” from the text she edited, *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance*, published in 1971. As Stephen Dillon points out, Davis “calls for the abolition of what she terms the ‘law-enforcement-judicial-penal network’ in addition to arguing for the construction of a mass movement that could contest the “victory of fascism” (Davis 1971: 50; Dillon 2013: 46). “Davis wanted more than an end to the prison and the violence of the police,” Dillon writes (2013: 46). He explains, “Like other early black feminist writing, Davis did not just call for the overthrow of one form of state power so that a new one may take its place. Instead, Davis implied that the social order itself must be undone” (Dillon 2013: 46). This is because Davis understood that “The prison was made possible by the libidinal, symbolic, and discursive regimes that actualized the uneven institutionalized distribution of value and disposability along the lines of race, gender, and sexuality. Davis called for the total epistemological and ontological undoing of the forms of knowledge and subjectivity that were produced by the racial state” (Dillon 2013: 46). In a similar way, I’m arguing that violence against women, which happens in their homes, on the streets, and in public sex spaces, is part of the social order that must be undone. It is not only a matter, as Delany claims, of more women visiting the porn cinemas to “take any (or every) role” he “already described or will go on to describe for any (and every) male theatre patron” (1999: 32).

Delany's analysis fails to recognize that one of the impacts of gendered violence is that there is often a negotiation to be carried out by women, physically and psychologically, with potential danger. This is a condition of oppression, and like racism or homophobia, it produces the same pervasive sense of needing to remain on the offensive and defensive at once in order to sustain agency and self-protection. As Delany writes in his science fiction novel, *Dhalgren*, "the city is a map of violences anticipated" (Delany 1974: 702). In the society we live in, this anticipation of violence is an ongoing experience, to different degrees, for women and for people of color as much as it is for queers. When Delany defines contact, he does not recognize that the kind of physical freedom needed to experiment with and enter a range of social interactions, which "contact" presupposes, is mediated for many women by the threat of gendered violence (1999: 123).

The queer space that Delany is imagining as a possibility for the future includes a queering of gender roles. He argues that the porn cinema does not have to exist only to serve men. Instead it can provide a space in which women can undermine traditional gender roles and reinvent expressions of their sexuality. However, a wide range of practices, activities, roles, and imaginaries involved in queer female sexuality remain invisible in his conceptualization of this potential space. As Vaid points out in her analysis of queer history and liberation struggle,

Male sexuality constructed many of the places gay men frequented to create community and identity. The baths, the bars, the backrooms, the bushes developed in part because men could do sexually what women are not allowed to do in this sexist culture....But, in truth, early lesbian communities had their own free-love norms. Non-monogamy was an article of dogma among many lesbians; straight women experimented with bisexuality in large numbers; and a small but influential group of sexual radicals began writing, organizing, and thinking about sex in way that would revolutionize feminist ideas on sex in the 'sex wars' around pornography and sadomasochism that erupted in the 1980s. (1995: 64)

Without an awareness of the physical environments, relational practices, and queer imaginaries that occur in queer spaces fostered and sustained by queer women, Delany cannot consider whether the qualities of the queer space of the porn cinema, which he describes in great detail, might already have an equivalent in lesbian culture. Instead he concludes: “What waits is for enough women to consider such venues as a locus of possible pleasure. I felt that way twenty years ago. Nothing I’ve heard from the reports in two decades of women’s bars and lesbian nights at male leather bars and the reports of men and women from heterosexual sex clubs has made me suspect I am wrong” (Delany 1999: 32). What is revealed in Delany’s analysis is that he is satisfied with what he calls his own “speculation” about women as a basis from which to draw his conclusions. He does not acknowledge that it would be useful to ask women directly about their experiences of sexuality and sexual expression in queer spaces, and about the kinds of roles and situations they have encountered in that context.

Delany assumes he knows what kind of open sexual expression occurs in lesbian queer space, which according to him, does not compare to what occurs in the porn cinemas on 42nd Street. Instead he argues women could—because he assumes they haven’t—carry out scenarios such as the one he describes of a “guy joking with his cousin and his cousin’s friends, coming down the stairs, genitals exposed,” and insists this would be politically and sexually liberating for women as a gesture or experience (Delany 1999: 32). Delany then takes up a feminist stance in his attempts to prove the ways oppositional or unconventional expressions of gender and sexuality, especially in relation to women and femininity, have the potential to shift ideological structures and cultural expectations including the policing of gender roles: “I believe it is only by inflicting...violences on the [West’s] concept [of women] that we can prevent actual violence against women’s bodies and minds in the political, material world” (Delany 1999: 32). With this

glancing consideration, “not to close off the subject but to open it up,” he argues for the narrative significance and prioritizing of concrete, personal evidence and experience—meaning his own gay male perspective—and returns to it as if coming home: “I return to an account of what things I actually saw” (Delany 1999: 32).

In an interview about a decade before *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* was published, Delany comments that because he is a man, his role in advocating for gender equality and resisting violence against women is limited:

I see myself as writing from a particular position. That position is black; it's gay; it's male; and it's far more contoured by the marginal workings of science fiction....I have a great deal of sympathy with a lot of feminist thinking. I couldn't call myself a feminist however, because I don't think a male *can* be a feminist, no matter how sympathetic he is to women's cause. It's not my fight—it's yours. And I am of the group you will have to take power from, if you're to win that fight—if only the power to oppress you. How sympathetic then, other than intellectually, can I be? It's like a white person calling himself a black militant. It just doesn't quite...you know...wash. I can be a feminist 'fellow traveler,' if you will. But that's it. That was part of my political education. And, indeed, when a man started calling himself a feminist, that was the definitive sign he didn't understand what feminism was really about, anyway. (Interview 1988: 267)

I think this position and its perspective is prevalent throughout his memoir when he writes about gender. His comments ignore the fact that gendered violence against women will not change until those responsible for the violence change their behavior. Further, individual actions will only impact the whole culture if they are accompanied by major structural changes. As Dillon explains of Davis's argument about racism and the prison complex: “In short, hope, for Davis, meant that the prison could not have a future, and more so, that a world that could have the prison would need to end as well” (2013: 46).

“Irrevocably anchored within the social”: Defying Erasure and Nostalgia

As an expression of radical queer negativity, Delany’s memoir expresses earnestness and over-investment in a particular queer space and time, and defies the criticism that he is too emotionally excessive in his memories or that he is blind to historical realities. He takes control of the critical rhetoric of his work by analyzing the discourse that attacks it. As part of Delany’s expression of radical queer negativity, he also explicitly names his desires in his memoir, and seems to privilege the fulfillment of these desires and the pleasure of intimacy above all else.

In his text, Delany offers both a defence and a rebuttal against the criticism that he is nostalgic because he attributes heightened emotion and meaning to the particular queer space he is writing about. He argues that the label of “nostalgia” functions as an ideological tactic to curtail or muffle dissenting narratives about neoliberalism, particularly arguments in favor of interclass contact. This rebuttal itself is a form of radical queer negativity. By directly addressing a critic who he feels is trying to police his expression, he intervenes in the ideological frameworks that he senses are being enforced on his work.

Delany references an article by Marshall Berman in his text, which states that Delany approaches his memories of Times Square with a form of nostalgia and thereby obscures the problems with the neighborhood while misremembering the past. The suggestion from Berman is that Delany is remembering in excess and for the wrong reasons. Berman complains that Delany, along with writer and architect Rem Koolhaas, and photographer Langdon Clay, are “nostalgic for the pre-AIDS golden age of hustling” because of their opposition to the redevelopment of Times Square (Delany 1999: 145-152, Berman 1997: 78). Berman talks about how “nostalgia” has “driven and crippled” conversations about Times Square, and is “pervasive...as an organizing force for visions of the place” (1997: 78). He perceives that nostalgia for “a golden

age,” a term he uses five times in five paragraphs, is also evidence of the relativity between the different interests in the neighborhood: “Times Square has the capacity to engender a ‘discourse of nostalgia’ that floats freely and unites people with radically different views of the Square and the world” (Berman 1997: 78).

There is a long history of linking the expression of nostalgia with queerness in homophobic terms. As Svetlana Boym writes, nostalgia was connected to notions of erotic and sexual deviant behavior in 19th century America because “idleness and a slow and inefficient use of time [were] conducive to day-dreaming, erotomania and onanism” (Boym 2001: 6). When queer spaces are remembered, valued, and given significance in counterpublic terms, this approach is often labeled as a failed project of nostalgia. One explanation for this criticism is that in heteronormative terms, queer spaces are considered inherently flawed. Therefore, to remember queer space in positive terms is to have a skewed or mistaken memory. As Halberstam notes: “Capitalist logic casts the homosexual as inauthentic and unreal, as incapable of proper love and unable to make the appropriate connections between sociality, relationality, family, sex, desire, and consumption. So before queer representation can offer a view of queer culture it must first repudiate the charge of inauthenticity and inappropriateness” (2009: 95).

The longing for a return to the past is often referred to as “nostalgia.” In the *Penguin Reference English Dictionary* (2003), “nostalgia” is defined as “wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for something past or irrecoverable,” and “the evocation of or indulgence in such sentiment” (2003: n. pag.). Nostalgia can also refer to “homesickness” from the Greek root *nostos* (2003: n. pag.). Yet, it is important to consider in whose interests the characterization of nostalgia is used as a means of dismissal. By insisting that someone is uselessly valuing and trying to maintain past conditions, both the individual’s memories and the remembered situation

are trivialized or undermined. The notion of “nostalgia” also polices the affective qualities of an individual’s experiences, suggesting that there is a right way and a wrong way to remember and to feel.

Excessive feeling, a key expression of radical queer negativity, is associated with nostalgia, as is the inability to fully embrace diachronic notions of history that insist the future will be better than the past, or that the present represents progress in relation to history. Nostalgia can be used as a tool of conservatism, but it can also be a form of unwieldy feeling out of step with, or even resistant to, dominant neoliberalism. This latter form is what emerges in Delany’s memoir as radical queer negativity. In its elegiac qualities, the text expresses a mournful rage that is, at times, channeled through dense analytical prose.

Delany differentiates a “nostalgic approach” from his own (1999: 13, 16). He also critiques how “nostalgia” is used as a tactic of dismissal and silencing about memories of positive interclass contact (Delany 1999: 122). He asserts that to claim “better relations” were involved in “social practices” from the past is not a statement of nostalgia (Delany 1999: 120). Delany indicates that one of the reasons he wants to differentiate his approach from a nostalgic treatment of the past is that he is aware of how conservative ideology uses nostalgia particularly when it comes to urban space (1999: 13, 16). Instead, Delany is interested in a queer model of historical development that challenges a diachronic notion of progress. He asserts that an understanding of the potential for liberation in queer experience is context specific:

The transformation from the cheap... (supremely) Forty-Second Street movie theatres of the fifties and sixties (where you could generally find some sort of sexual activity in the back balcony, off to the side, or in the restrooms) to the porn theatres of the seventies (a number of them set up specifically for quick, convenient encounters among men) does not, in my memory at any rate, fit easily into such ordinary/nostalgic schema. (Delany 1999: 16)

Another aspect of Delany's expression of radical queer negativity is his ambiguous meanings. In one instance he contradicts himself about the difference between social and sexual contact, explaining that "Because of the Forty-second Street area, my personal life as a New Yorker was a lot more pleasant, from, say, 1980 to 1992 than it has been, after a three-year transition period, from 1995 to now. What made it more pleasant was [sic] the cheap films and the variety of street contact available—the vast majority of that, let me make it clear... was not sexual at all; though, of course, much of it was" (Delany 1999: 146-47). It is difficult to decipher Delany's truth here, almost as if he is wrestling with his own interpretation of his experience and allowing that ambiguity to stand out. As intellectual writing, his memoir forces the reader to work hard to follow his analysis and meaning. The ways in which abstract language, dense analysis, and occasional ambiguity accompany the narrator's personal anecdotes and graphic descriptions of sexual encounters, are also what generate the expressions of radical queer negativity in the memoir.

In his fight against the erasure of queer counterpublic histories, Delany's rhetorical strategy as an expression of radical queer negativity includes a form of defiance. Delany challenges Berman's use of the term "golden age," by suggesting it does not exist: "If there was any such 'golden age,' I never had any experience of it, nor was I aware of any such thing at the time. (I assume he must mean pre-1982, possibly pre'84)" (1999: 145-146). Delany is also invested in emphasizing the notion that the dynamics of sex and sexual expression in Times Square, at least for queer men, was only in small part commercial. He calls the "assumption that all or most of the homosexual contact around Times Square was commercial, that is, involved hustlers or other sex workers," an "erroneous" claim (Delany 1999: 145-146). Instead he argues that, "While the lure of hustlers most certainly helped attract the sexually available and sexually

curious to the area, a good 80 to 85 percent of the gay sexual contacts that occurred there (to make what is admittedly a totally informal guess) were not commercial” (Delany 1999: 145-46). Near the end of his text, Delany argues that “the Times Square takeover” is an example of the “visible manifestation of the small being obliterated by the large” (1999: 172). Delany points out the hypocrisy of the Forty-second Street Development Project claiming that they care about theatre, because, “under pressure” from this corporation, “since 1980, at least five theatres...have already been pulled down...and five more...have been totally remodeled into something that can never be used as theatrical space again. Nor does this count any of the nine theatres on Forty-second Street that stand closed and awaiting demolition” (1999: H 173). Delany asserts that recognizing this hypocrisy is not about being “nostalgic or any yearning for authenticity” (1999: H 172).

Ricardo Montez has criticized Delany for ignoring, or even concealing his own participation as a john in the sexual exchanges in Times Square (2006: 425-440). Montez suggests this concealment by Delany undermines the narrator’s claim to be a witness of other queer men’s experiences in relation to the loss of queer space (2006: 425-440). According to Montez, Delany is using the men he writes about and interviews without acknowledging how this amounts to appropriation or exploitation in his memoir (2006: 425-440). I argue that Delany’s dedication to presenting his own reality with great intensity and investment is an expression of radical queer negativity. I also want to consider how Delany’s relations with other men at the cinemas, and the ways he represents these relations through appropriation at certain points in the narrative, are extensions of what Muñoz understands as crucially humane, alternative economies that gay men engage in for sex. Muñoz identifies these relations as:

A pathos that undergirds... gay male erotic economies...in which flesh, pleasure, and money meet outlaw circumstances. This economy eschews the standardized routes in

which heteronormative late capitalism mandates networking relations of sex for money. This economy represents a selling of sex for money that does not conform to the corporate American sex trade always on display for us via media advertising culture and older institutions such as heterosexual marriage. The hustler-john relationship represents a threat to these other naturalized performances of sex for money, in part because it promotes contact between people of different class and racial backgrounds. (2009: 59)

Similarly, it is important to understand, as Ahmed points out, that queer counterpublic practices are not outside of capitalist systems of exchange, appropriation, and exploitation. These practices may offer alternative modes of queer support and exchange, but they are bound up with capitalist economics: “The opening up of non-familial desires allows new forms of commodification; the ‘non’ of the ‘non-normative’ is not outside existing circuits of exchange, but may even intensify the movement of commodities, which converts into capital....The commodification of queer involves histories of exploitation....So it is important not to identify queer as outside the global economy which transform ‘pleasure’ into ‘profit’ by exploiting the labour of others” (Ahmed 2004: 163).

Desire, as part of Delany’s expression of radical queer negativity, is clearly conveyed and made central throughout his memoir. He urges the reconstitution and regaining of the queer space that has been lost. He also argues that the way to begin dismantling the “discursive discourse” that is used to defend redevelopment, is to unpack the notion of desire. He suggests that just like desire, the process of understanding oneself as gay is “irrevocably anchored within the social, rather than...breaking out of the social into an uncharted and unmapped beyond” (Delany 1999: 191-92).

“Pretty much like you, pretty much like me”: Queer Creaturely Relations

As an expression of queer creaturely life, Delany’s narrative focus is drawn to the denizens of the porn cinemas, people he insists, are “pretty much like you, pretty much like me,” (1999: 90).

The creatureliness in this queer space emerges in the “odd behavior,” that he observes there (Delany 1999: 61). In my theorization, Delany’s act of witnessing is a creaturely act. Like his critical analysis, it emerges as an oppositional intervention in the social and material processes of gentrification as well as its normative regimes.

In articulating queer creatureliness, the narrator in Delany’s memoir describes figuratively and literally embracing the bodies of others in all their strangeness. The opportunity to encounter strangeness in intimate ways is what Delany seeks in the queer spaces around Times Square and 42nd Street. He notes of himself, “Odd behavior has always intrigued me” (Delany 1999: 61). In the context of his memoir, queer intimacies are the most important form of contact for Delany, yielding all kinds of human behavior, just like New York itself. Detailing these particular scenes and characters allows Delany to broadly address “psychologically troubling events” in the theatre (1999: 58).

The creaturely as an intervention in the normative also emerges in the descriptions of strangeness or madness that occur in the queer spaces of the porn cinema. Delany explains that in these queer spaces he was able to “see that madness from a different perspective—and perhaps learn a little about it” (1999: 65). Henry David Thoreau’s writing about the experience of queerness seems to reflect Delany’s stance. Berlant and Warner explain that Thoreau writes about, “The experience of queerness—meaning not only strangeness but also the nonnormal and the imperfectly intelligible—as a necessary dimension of subjectivity” (Berlant and Warner 1998: 220). Delany includes himself using the first-person plural pronoun, to claim to be among the denizens exhibiting the behavior he witnesses in the creaturely terms: “whatever strangenesses we displayed” (1999: 73). Delany represents the queer space of the cinema as being able to contain and sustain these behaviors in such a way that they are not, according to his

representations, more harmful to participants (1999: 32-34). Nor is madness more heightened in the porn cinema than in contexts outside it, according to Delany (1999: 65). As a writer and curious explorer of the human condition, part of Delany's engagement with this queer space seems to be the intrigue of the strangeness and oddness he encountered there in conjunction with the forms of pleasure and social or sexual stimulation he found.

In Delany's narratives, his creaturely gaze, as an act of witnessing, is focused on what he understands to be the dismantling and devaluing of queer spaces and the erasure of their histories and meanings. His narrative of the queer past intervenes in the dominant notions of the porn cinemas as sites of deviance, danger and perversion. He reanimates the past by insisting that the queer space of the porn cinemas was valuable and meaningful to him. Delany establishes as a "presupposition" of both essays—that New York City planned and intended this project of redevelopment since the beginning of the 1960s," and it is "the culmination of forty years' expectation and attendant real estate and business machinations, not to mention much concerted public disapproval and protest" (1999: xiii). In Delany's narrative about the neighborhood around Times Square, he again wants to problematize the diachronic notion of progression, through nuanced attention to the haunting aspects of the queer history he is writing about:

With the rush to accommodate the new, much that was beautiful along with much that was shoddy, much that was dilapidated with much that was pleasurable, much that was inefficient with much that was functional, is gone. The idea that all that is going was ugly and awful is as absurd as it would be to propose that what was there was only of any one moral color. What was there was a complex of interlocking systems and subsystems. (1999: xx)

Delany defines the term "perversion" used by critics of the old Times Square, pre-redevelopment, as "noncommercial sexual encounters between those of the same sex who can find each other more easily in a neighborhood with sex movies, peep show activities, and commercial sex" (1999: 161). His non-judgmental definition is meant to demonstrate that the

term of “perversion” is often assigned according to a heteronormative value system. For Delany, such perversion is an essential part of living, “something no less necessary to...appetitive life than good food and fresh water” (1999: xviii). In this description, “perversion” becomes a creaturely act. It is a necessary stance and activity that at the same time exists as a state of exception to heteronormative expectations and therefore yields the potential for liberation. Similarly, Delany’s queer understanding of “perversion” is an aspect of queer creatureliness in the memoir because he makes it visible as an imperative aspect of an inclusive ethical system that asserts the fundamental value and meaning of every human life.

There are many instances in the text in which Delany describes men who witness or realize something about themselves through their sexual experience and expressiveness that opens them further to the world. This growing openness they experience momentarily or over time, produces new ethical material with which they might choose to contend (Delany 1999: 39-90). I argue that this is also a way to understand what contact means for Delany in his memoir. These heightened states of expression and witnessing that public sex in the queer space of the porn cinemas provide for Delany are what generate his own personal revelations. In this sense, the entire text is about Delany’s creaturely attempt to come to terms with this new ethical material and to encourage the reader to do the same.

Santner’s discussion of another contemporary writer, W.G. Sebald, offers insight into Delany’s text. Santner describes Sebald as having an obsession with “developing the means to engage with the ‘neighbor’ in his or her creaturely expressivity,” which in turn has motivated him to produce “*an archive of creaturely life*” through his writing (Santner 2006: xiii). I argue that this also becomes a preoccupation in Delany’s text through his many descriptions of the oddness or quirks he encounters in the men at the cinemas, which he also finds personally

familiar: “The encounters you remember are, the men who were a little different, a little strange, the odder denizens of the Venus, this particular cock, that particular smile. Yes, they include the walking wounded...But most of the guys I had at the Capri, day in and day out, year after year....though they tended to be more working class than not, were pretty much like you, pretty much like me” (Delany 1999: 89-90). As an expression of queer creaturely life, Delany’s memoir reanimates the queer past and gives it meaning through his personal accounts of the porn cinemas, and his counterpublic perspectives on what occurred in those queer spaces.

Chapter Five: *Inferno (A Poet's Novel)* by Eileen Myles

A Poetic Inventory of Queer Space and the Witnessing of a Queer Self

When the poet Eileen Myles arrived in New York in 1974 at the age of 25, the city was the terrain in which she wandered and became herself. Her memoir, *Inferno (A Poet's Novel)* (2010), like much of her writing, draws on counterpublic practices and imaginaries to address a female public from a queer perspective. It is profoundly influenced by queer spaces in New York. In particular, Myles was immersed in the Downtown scene and poetry scene in the East Village, pro-sex queer culture, and a queer punk aesthetic that manifests in her text as radical queer negativity. *Inferno (A Poet's Novel)* is an aesthetically astute and versatile narrative of poetic prose, deliberately occupying the border between fiction and non-fiction. Like Wojnarowicz and Delany's memoirs, the form and style of Myles's text defies genre characterization and redefines the concept of the novel. Her language shimmers with figurative beauty, a harrowing openness, and a generous sense of humor. Since Myles came out as a poet and a lesbian in the late-1970s, her queer gaze and poetic sensibility have been central to the way she witnesses and interprets herself and the world through her writing.

The ways in which Myles defines queer freedom in her text, and her focus on how to sustain it, determine the memories of the experiences of queer space that she represents in her archive, and the counterpublic experiences she documents. In particular, I examine three kinds of queer spaces represented in *Inferno (A Poet's Novel)*. She writes about her apartment as a personal queer space of poetic creation. It is a private space yet still immersed in the world. She also describes the public, social queer spaces where she performs her poetry and forms relational connections. Throughout her memoir she depicts the streets of the East Village and Soho where

she walks and gains greater familiarity with herself and the city. In each of these queer spaces, her memoir documents strategies of resistance and experiences of liberation that she has explored in order to sustain her freedom.

Myles uses a counterpublic perspective, poetic rendering of minoritarian experience, and innovative narrative form, to document and record experiences of queer space that are rarely represented in American literature. What sets Myles's *Inferno* apart from Wojnarowicz and Delany's memoirs is its address to a female public from a queer perspective infused with experiences of growing up working class. As she explains in an interview, "I act as if it's a given that you're comfortable with a lesbian reality... When it comes in I don't prepare you for it, it's just there. I act like the female reality is central and the working class reality is normal" (Myles, Personal Interview 2011).

Queer spaces are crucial in much of Myles's writing. She defines them as "the enormously unbelievable and rich and magical and abject inventory of the spaces I've passed through, and the places and locations where relationships have taken place" (Personal Interview 2012). *Inferno (A Poet's Novel)* (2010), is the third text in her trilogy of memoirs. Because it is "a poet's novel" dealing with Myles's work and identity as a poet, my discussion of the text's representations of queer space will also explore her poetic techniques and forms.

Like Wojnarowicz and Delany's memoirs, Myles's writing intervenes in the erasure of the queer spaces in New York City in the last quarter of the 20th century. She explains, "A lot of my intent and desire and why I write is to create that space... to say that that space exists. Because my sense is that in so many ways that space doesn't exist and it won't and I've seen that within the world of poetry, and even in the world of queerness" (Myles, Personal Interview 2012). She indicates that this loss of queer space is both public and personal. As she points out,

“In terms of my identity and self, there was always this enormous potential of loss, both as a female, as a queer, as a person of a certain economic background, as an artist, and as a poet” (Myles, Personal Interview 2012). To intervene in the erasure of queer space is a defining motivation for her work.

Setting the Record Queer

One of Myles’s earliest and most important realizations about writing was that it is a “recording” (Personal Interview 2011). The conceit of recording of life as it happens is a stylistic technique and formal approach associated with poetry of the New York School. It is a major practice in Myles’s *Inferno* as well as in her poetry. In an interview she observes that writing, “Is and always was a recording...think about when *Interview Magazine* was new...Those interviews were verbatim, all the wasted verbiage. The New York School, like John Ashbery, picked up on that...It’s an abstraction” (Myles, Personal Interview 2011). Like Wojnarowicz and Delany’s memoirs, Myles’s *Inferno* engages the reader with the conceit that she is leading us through the queer spaces she experienced in New York. Her memories are made vivid and visceral because they are staged as if occurring in the present even though they are inserted within a narrative frame of retrospection. The tone of her writing as a recording bears traces of the New York School, including its animated impressions, and an irregular rhythm of attention that lingers, wanders, leaps forward, or pursues an image or idea, depending on the circumstances of her witnessing. As Myles notes, “Ultimately... ‘New York School’ just means putting yourself in the middle of a place and being excited and stunned by it, and trying to make sense of it in your own work” (Interview 2000: 25).

In *Inferno*, Myles emphasizes the influence of Frank O'Hara and James Schuyler for her writing, both of whom contributed to the queer sensibilities of the New York School. She links her impression of Schuyler's poem with her own decision to leave graduate school and fully commit her life to being a poet (Myles 2010: 42). Myles cites O'Hara's poetry as resonating with her when she came to New York, just eight years after his accidental death. She recalls: "The poems were queenie—slippery and fast like the city outside the store. You could hear it right on the page....You had to close the book if you wanted it to stop" (2010: 42).

Myles describes the poetic self in her texts as "reassembling" over time, and in different queer spaces (Personal Interview 2012). This vision of the self is in keeping with both Schuyler and O'Hara's poetry which features a queer consciousness engaged in change and movement, reveling in its impressions of the cityscape and in queer relational possibilities even in moments of intense loss or loneliness. *Inferno* expresses the poetic motion found in their writing

While the queer poetic sensibility of the New York School influences Myles's writing, it is also radically expanded in her work. Representations of lesbian subjectivity were rarely featured in New York poetry scene before Myles began performing and publishing her writing. While the poetry of the New York School uses animated abstractions that can produce a sense of detachment from the personal or the intimate, Myles emphasizes bodily, sensory, and intellectual experience that render the personal and intimate in expansive ways. Nelson has termed Myles's approach "metabolic poetry," to convey the ways it "meditates on the various links between one's class, one's speech, and one's body" (2007: 202-203).

The New York School privileges the idea of writing about any experience, whether banal or profane, to convey and explore its meaning. For Myles, an attentiveness to her experience and to its articulation are what allow for her survival and development as a writer. As she sits in a bar

in New York shortly after arriving in the city, and considers whether she should take a job as a sex worker that is being offered to her by another girl her age, she is momentarily full of despair. She notes: “But if I really paid attention, really paid attention maybe I could ignore the mountain of sadness and she might entertain and distract me and I would think this is life” (Myles 2010: 17).

Myles’s use of autobiographical narratives and representations of personal experience in much of her poetry and prose were inspired by Truffaut’s films and other “boy coming-of-age movies,” as well as from visiting the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston as a child where she saw someone “talking on a monitor about his life” (Myles 2010: 169). In *Inferno*, Myles writes about noticing that this form of recording “was like a diary,” and also like “teevee,” and she realized it was something she could do (2010: 169). In college, “Jack Nicholson’s DJ in the King of Marvin Gardens” made an impression on her (Myles, Personal Interview 2012, Myles 2010: 61). As she explains in *Inferno*: “The DJ told the story of his life in the dark to a tape recorder. It was the best poetry idea I had seen thus far” (2010: 61).

Myles also discusses the influence of Andy Warhol’s early films on her work. She explains that, prior to Warhol’s work, the dominant dictates of popular culture suggested that “A universe of invisible dangers awaits anybody of the underclass who leaves their group, wanting more. Cause if you’re not picked—really taken up by the mainstream as a winner—you’ll probably get stomped on as a loser. So smile for the camera and stay in your chair” (Myles 2010: 152). Myles argues that “Andy Warhol’s early movies...were a correction of this....He documented the wrong subjects for awkward (real) lengths of time” (2010: 152).

Born in Arlington, Massachusetts in 1949, Myles attended college in Boston. After travelling briefly in Europe, she came to New York to go to graduate school “for a second”

(Myles 2010: 38). Her development as a poet in New York began when she attended workshops in the late 1970s and early 1980s at St Mark's Poetry Project, located at St Mark's Place, a cultural and literary hub in the East Village. She became the Artistic Director of the Poetry Project from 1984-1986, running a weekly reading series and expanding the scope of the programming.

Like Wojnarowicz, her prose writing was particularly inspired by the monologue texts of Karen Finley and Spalding Grey. The novels of Christopher Isherwood were important to her for their "transparency" of perspective (Myles, Personal Interview 2012). She also emphasizes the major impact of Jill Johnston and Gertrude Stein's writing on her work (Myles, Personal Interview 2012). Her contemporaries who were important influences include Cookie Mueller, Bruce Gluck, Dodie Bellamy, and Dennis Cooper (Myles, Personal Interview 2012).

In the 1990s, the Native Agents New Fiction Series at Semiotext(e) began publishing innovative writing about sex and sexuality by women. The series, which was established by Chris Kraus in 1989, critically encouraged first-person narratives and experimental writing by Kathy Acker, Lynne Tillman, Michelle Tea, Eileen Myles, and Jane Delynn (Stosuy 2006: 98). Semiotext(e), based in New York, mixed French theory by thinkers such as Foucault, and Deleuze and Guattari, with American popular culture. Its Polysexuality issue in 1981 was groundbreaking for the ways in which it theorized the body and sexuality in queer ways prior to the AIDS crisis (Stosuy 2006: 98).

Myles developed her work as a writer in the context of a thriving independent publishing scene in the East Village. All kinds of zines, magazines and journals were being created along with flyers, photos, letterpress broadsides and drawings to accompany them. In an interview with Dennis Cooper, for the Afterword to an anthology of writing from the Downtown scene, Myles

comments: “What preceded our scene were these magazines....in lieu of having a band, you did a magazine that got your model out there of what and what you had in mind” (Afterword 2006: 467). In *Inferno* she describes starting her own magazine in the late 1970s:

I called it dodgems. My concept was all these styles colliding like an amusement park ride. I didn't have to decide. I love the corrupt part of anybody's art. I put my ideas in a magazine. You had to do it; it was like being in a band. And people were doing that too....We all liked bands. Those were our friends. They weren't in the workshop—maybe David Wojnarowicz was but we were basically all in the neighborhood at the same time....And some people in bands were poets first. Patti Smith. We bragged about them. They had to move on, but us—our extreme experiment, mine, was to not. I had read the Kierkegaard thing about the purity of the heart being the ability to desire one thing, so I was like a rock star (sure) but poetry was my god. (Myles 2010: 208)

Both Cooper and Myles agree that the literary scene in the East Village changed in significant ways as the 1980s went on. Cooper reflects:

If AIDS hadn't happened, Downtown probably would have continued to be an amazingly fertile place that was continually evolving. I know that's naïve because the gentrification of the East Village and the Lower East Side and SoHo was probably the real culprit and killer. But for me, it's impossible to think of that time in New York without the pall of the AIDS crisis, and about all my dead friends, and the incredible artists who died so fucking young. It was a hugely formative time for the artists of my generation who lived there, but it's also like remembering a war that I was lucky to survive. (Afterword 2006: 478-79)

Myles argues that: “In New York AIDS made all the difference....it changed New York.

Permanently, because I just think that it was easier to be straight and not deal with AIDS. And there was no way you could do that and be gay” (Afterword 2006: 469). She remembers the way in which the AIDS crisis produced more conflict within the queer community, dividing and aligning various groups. In particular it solidified her connection with other lesbians who were mourning their gay friends:

I think of Act Up, which I...just couldn't do, every time I went to those meetings, I'd just be overwhelmed by the egos....Remember, we all started having fights around '90, '91. All sorts of people didn't speak to each other for about ten years. A lot of it was about AIDS—and careers. No one could deal—or fight, or be sad as a group. And that's just ending now, it seems to me....The up side of these fights for me was that I felt compelled

to find women as a group for the first time, you know? Not to just be passing through the Duchess or WOW but finding a bunch for myself. I mean as the main group. (Myles, Afterword 2006: 479)

Myles's memoir explores the impact of the AIDS epidemic on her experiences of queer space and on her writing. Like Wojnarowicz and Delany, in her memoir she articulates the state of emergency generated by the AIDS crisis in New York:

By 1990 everyone was dying....First Tim then on and on and on. My sadness was a bell....The place I found was carved out of sadness and sex and to write a poem there you merely needed to gather. There would be days in which feelings were so externalized that you just behaved like a painter a kid with deep pockets, bringing the lavender home. The poem was a grid—that swayed and moving through it you just picked up things and hung them on the grid all the while singing your broken heart out. Humming. It was a deep deep grey. (Myles 2010: 260-261)

Asserting a Queer Gaze and Claiming a Female Public

In her memoir Myles explains that she intends *Inferno* to be a study of her own attention span as poet, which in turn is also a study of her gaze and attunement to the world and the queer spaces of New York she inhabits: “No one asked me to have a life like this, to be a poet. It was my idea. I mean I would definitely say poetry is a very roundabout way to unite both work and time. A poet is a person with a very short attention span who actually decides to study it. To look. To draw that short thing out” (Myles 2010: 108).

The first-person narrative in *Inferno* recalls Myles's memories of coming out in New York as a poet and a lesbian. These two forms of identity and experience are intertwined in the text. As she explains at the beginning of the narrative: “I became a lesbian in New York. It was my first or second career. It was wrecking my poetry as long as I didn't know what it was” (Myles 2010: 184). Nelson notes that during a performance at St Mark's Place in 1977, Myles “came out as a poet and a dyke maybe all in one reading” (2007: 173).

Myles became a poet and a lesbian in New York by engaging in a process of claiming and defining her own poetics, her own voice as a writer, and her own expression of gender.

Inferno traces this journey of becoming in which queer space is key. As Myles explains in an interview:

It always seems to be a mediated space when I think of where I might begin. Interiority moving through the world...I'm claiming my gaze...to claim a female public. Or the assailing of the public by a female private perhaps. I feel like my work begins with an arc. There's a way in which narrative is a foregone conclusion that has already happened. It's too late. And that's really a disturbing thought perhaps. You can't stop it. (Personal Interview 2012)

Myles's comment that the narrative in *Inferno* is something "you can't stop," highlights the ways in which the content and form of her memoir are actively in tension with a heteronormative discourse. Similarly, because the narrative arc has already occurred in her memoir, the conventional form of the novel is also being undermined. The genre of her text becomes difficult to categorize. This is another way in which *Inferno* is in tension with the conventions of mainstream American literature. When Myles won the Lambda award for her memoir in 2011, she explained that genre is a normative convention like gender, and it is her practice to subvert them both: "It's fun to get an award for this book, because I've written a novel that people keep telling me isn't a novel. I love the idea of destabilizing genre as much as gender is unstable" (Speech 2011: n. pag.).

Myles's memoir is counterpublic in the ways it celebrates anti-assimilation and defies marginality. It asserts a queer, female, working-class reality, and takes that reality as a given, as unstoppable, and as a narrative of experience that has already begun and is already becoming itself. Myles uses this approach with "viral intension," placing her work with a publisher that doesn't claim itself to be an archive for particular categories of writing:

I make great efforts in my work to start from a queer space but to not call it that. I recoil as an artist, from naming something by what it contains...sort of like a warning on the outside, as if the bell has already been rung, so that the inside is voided a bit....I think that telling people on the outside that this is “a feminist book” or this is “a women’s press” bothers me....So in that sense, in terms of publishing, I’m not in a queer archive. It’s because I would rather invade the other archive as a queer.... to have that presence be there when you didn’t expect it....in all its weird, life-giving inevitability. (Personal Interview 2012)

Myles is aware of the power of the archive to determine the visibility and the perceived cultural significance of creative work. Her choice of publisher resists marginality while also affirming the visibility of her counterpublic practices and her original poetics. Her decision to make her writing be “that presence...there when you didn’t expect it....in all it’s weird, life-giving, inevitability” is also how she understands her role as a writer—to be a witness and to record her experiences of queer space.

Myles’s first-person narration employs a combination of self-revelation and critique, which are also techniques present in the memoirs of Wojnarowicz and Delany. Her use of humor expands the tone of intimacy in her work. She understands the performance of poetry as a form of entertainment that is in part about disturbance: “A poetry reading at best is a series of disruptions” (Myles, Personal Interview 2012). Like Wojnarowicz and Delany, when Myles performs her writing, she asserts and records the significance of queer spaces in public, thereby resisting their erasure.

The journey of becoming that Myles describes in *Inferno*, is loosely based on Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*. The labyrinth Myles travels through is her life in New York City in the last quarter of the 20th century. It is a terrain that provides her with both suffering and ecstasy, which she articulates in her memoir along with vivid quotidian details and visceral qualities of the urban landscape she occupies. The realms of Myles’s journey, adapted from the mythical concepts of *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* in Dante’s poems, are also figured in her memoir

as the contested queer spaces of New York that she creates, represents, and navigates through her memories.

Solnit points out that Dante's allegorical model of the labyrinth uses the activity of walking as an activity of "reading" in order to "describe a world" (2000: 77). His *Inferno* traces the three spaces or "realms" of the soul after death, where "the movement of the narrative is echoed by the movement of the characters across an imaginary landscape" (Solnit 2000: 77-78). Solnit notes of the labyrinth form, that "keeping to the winding path became important" (2000: 69). Myles appropriates this model of poetics and representation offered by Dante's text, incorporating it into her own narrative of self-discovery and attentiveness to the world. She asserts the importance of tending her freedom by keeping her aim of being a poet at the front of her mind, directing her life choices, just as Dante emphasizes the importance of following one's rightful path.

Myles's memoir is divided into three sections according to these three mythical concepts adapted from Dante. Just as in Wojnarowicz and Delany's texts, the three sections are made up of shorter vignettes, episodes, catalogues, observations, commentary, asides, gossip, and dialogue between characters. These formal elements serve to embody and amplify the narrative voice in the memoir with particular textures, tones, and emotional and intellectual registers that are recognizable aspects of Myles's stylistic approach.

In the "Abstract" that is placed at the beginning of the second section, she explains her arrangement of the novel's form: "Throughout my inferno I am following both Dante and Freud's model for 'existence.' The Divine Comedy is of course three parts, but Freud's definition of sanity has only two: the ability to love and work. Women though might actually be a little more medieval than men. We don't start off being 'human.' I mean that's been my

experience” (Myles 2010: 95). In this last statement, one of the major tensions of the memoir also manifests: the differences between Myles’s “experience,” on one hand, and how women are often perceived and represented in dominant culture, on the other. Her narratives of experience in the memoir serve to overturn assumptions and expectations that women “don’t start off being human” (Myles 2010: 95).

In asserting full humanness, Myles’s memoir creates new ways to understand experiences of being queer, female, and working class. There is space in her memoir for women as fully human to also be fully flawed. As Myles explains in an interview, “Especially since the Eighties, what followed feminism seemed to be this female perfectionism. In the same way that there was a period where you just couldn’t write about something horrible happening to a gay person without being kind of criticized or repeating bad stereotypes about gay people. And likewise as a female I think people wanted fictions about female success not female failure, but at that moment, we lose our humanness” (Personal Interview 2011).

The “Abstract” in Myles’s *Inferno* is similar to Delany’s “Introduction” in that it is instructive about how to approach her text. Using the scenario of following protocols of a grant application, she both satirizes and formalizes the authorial process of appealing to a particular readership:

This proposal is a guidebook; it follows the utter singularity of my entire writing career. The shape my writing forces you through. I mean for as long as I can remember I have been trying to break into reality through this one idea. This medium. Poetry. Yet where did I get the idea to write about myself. To use my own name. Is that natural. (Myles 2010: 169)

In asking these questions as a statement at the end of the passage, Myles’s reveals their ridiculousness and also critiques the fact that they are asked of women, particularly queer or working class women, and women of color, who write and publish counterpublic narratives of

personal experience. There is both a sense of urgency and a defiance in Myles's project that emerge through her satire in this section, as though her memoir is offered in resistance to a silencing of her voice or an erasure of her experience: "Will I talk about that idea. I may not have another opportunity in my life to do this so yes. Yes I will" (2010: 169).

Like Wojnarowicz and Delany, Myles emphasizes that her work will frustrate the rules of commercial marketing within the publishing industry: "The marketing people will say—so who is she. Who is the author of this book, this lesbian no one, that we should listen to all this crap about her development. She didn't win anything, right. Okay. Did anything horrible happen to her. Noooo, I mean yes but that's not what she's writing about here and maybe it wasn't that bad" (2010: 169).

In her "Abstract" Myles also explains that the first section of her novel explicitly takes up the theme of becoming. The first section of the memoir is nameless but corresponds to Dante's first book in *The Divine Comedy*, which he called "Inferno" (Myles 2010: 1-94). It focuses on how "the young female narrator in becoming a poet has also become human. I don't mean to imply that sex workers (the road not taken) are not human. I do mean that in this female human history (Inferno) she was a bad one. A quitter. I go forward now with work, then love" (Myles 2010: 95). These notions of "a bad one" and "a quitter" are expressive modes of queer subjectivity that I theorize in terms of radical queer negativity later in the chapter.

Myles has entitled her second section, "Drops" which she explains in her abstract as "constituting both a proposal to the Ferdinand Foundation and a novelization of the working part of Dante ['Purgatorio']" (2010: 95). Later in the text she refers to how, "The subject of 'drops' is really just all that time. How this poet spent it" (Myles 2010: 108). The second section concerns "the career of the poet" who Myles is becoming throughout the text. Myles explains that the third

section of her novel is entitled “Heaven” which coincides with “love” (2010: 95). It is the only section of the three that is explicitly linked through its title to Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*.

Like Wojnarowicz and Delany, Myles makes use of first-person narration as a form of self-study. She also maintains a mask or distance in relation to the reader, even as she inhabits the narrative voice by allowing herself to be identified with it as the character of Eileen Myles:

In my writing I’m assuming an absolute preoccupation on your part, some diffuse you, of me, so I’m starting with that as a great discomfort that I’m trying to shed all the time. Sometimes I’m just addressing it directly and in other ways completely shunning it, creating an outer opaque space. Sometimes I think there’s a kind of obscenity in this willingness to be witnessed or this kind of tacit assumption that one is being witnessed. There are supposed to be more spaces between a person and that witnessing, more institutions, more power, especially for a woman. It’s like, somebody is supposed to protect you. (Myles, Personal Interview 2012)

In her memory of being a young woman, Myles explains that she wanted to document the chaos of the self as it engages in constant change: “At 27 it was okay to live. Everything was pathetic and it wouldn’t stop. I’m a mess. And I could show how that looked. I resigned myself to continuous movement. Like I’m drawing. Like if there is ‘a form’ it exists independent of me, or else I’m complicit in it” (2010: 214). In her memory of the beginning of middle age, at 43, she explains that her self-examination was a form of reading that involved gaining familiarity with the human she had become: “In some quiet completely absorbing way I read me every day, especially when I was reading. I read my tone which altered along the slope of the month and it would inform me when the reading must end and I couldn’t bear my body anymore in its fake agreement with my mind, the body then vaulting over the mind’s walls” (Myles 2010: 138).

Numerous times, Myles addresses the reader directly, a technique that Wojnarowicz and Delany use more sparingly in their memoir texts. In discussing her undergraduate years before moving to New York, she says, “I lived in Arlington which was close to Boston, but you’re probably getting the idea it was another world” (Myles 2010: 10). This address to the reader is

part of Myles's approach to engage her audience and to include us in her personal experience. It functions as both a form of entertainment, a "bait-and-switch" as she calls it, and also a performance of disturbance (Myles, Personal Interview 2012).

For Myles, the work of writing about personal experience through first-person narration is a way to know the self and to come to terms with the self that is not yet known. She calls attention to this unknown aspect of herself in the memoir: "It's easy to write an autobiography if the absence in the story is me. I remember applying to art school in 1967, staying up late, and I saw my reflection in the black glass of the night. When a window becomes a mirror. Who do I think I am sitting here now, deeper in that life" (Myles 2010: 242).

The figurative image of the window also emerges in Myles's discussion of form in her writing. As she engages in the self-examination needed to produce the memoir, she is looking at the narrative as a mirror, and the form of the narrative emerges as an "assemblage" of different queer spaces simultaneously:

My favorite idea of form is thinking of a window. The inside of a space on a rainy night. And seeing a wet leaf slap against the window and another one on top of that and another one on top of that. I feel like a lot of my sense of perception and form is that kind of organic assemblage and so if I thought about all of the things I have written it would be probably a multitude of spaces. (Myles, Personal Interview 2012)

Myles describes the treatment of these overlapping spaces as a kind of layering or "queering," which can occur "formally, in that more antique sense of the word 'queer' as being oddly shaped and unconventional" (Personal Interview 2012). Nelson argues that Myles uses "plain language and lets the principle artifice lie in the art of juxtaposition" which is "a structuring principle...plumbed through the twentieth century in the development of collage and montage aesthetics" (2007: 197). The use of collage and juxtaposition is also a primary characteristic of form in Wojnarowicz and Delany's texts.

For Myles, performance is also characterized by assemblage, “More of those leaves slapping, that’s what the space of performance is. I think absolutely, that a book is a space of performance” (Personal Interview 2012). At the same time she understands performance as a space of release, a “spending” that lies at the “heart of” her work as “a huge loss” she wants to “record” (Myles 2010: 108-109). She points to the way that the experience and performance of life unfolding as a natural, unstoppable loss can be recorded through language and narratives as “drops”: “Just look at the day. Going, going, going. Nothing but loss. That’s life and obviously that’s performance. Maybe the best way to see these drops is a recording” (Myles 2010: 108-09). The result is that performance can change a space and make it queer: “There’s a remaking, and a turning of a place of suffering into a stage or a fantasia...I think there’s a kind of destabilization that includes queerness, all the time” (Myles, Personal Interview 2012).

Just as Myles understands her work to be claiming a female public, she explains that the use of the first-person narration is a way to negotiate her own private and public sense of self. She addresses these tensions of private and public in terms similar to Wojnarowicz and Delany, however she emphasizes the significance of gender identity whereas their discussion is centered on queer sexuality:

I feel that my work is in some ways about making my privacy public and turning it out...the rhythm of it. I think there is a kind of denial about a female interiority because we’re always being told what we are and what we ought to be. So you never get to start from that first place where you’re thinking something or you’re feeling something. You’re always having to discredit some new version of who or what you’re being told you are. (Myles, Personal Interview 2012)

In *Inferno*, Myles’s journey is also about becoming a cultural figure or an icon of queer, butch, poetic punk sensibility and style. Her narrative is in part a series of reflections about her process of self-creation. In this way, she creates her own queer mythology just as Wojnarowicz and Delany do in their memoirs, but she also deconstructs this process of self-creation.

Myles observes that to self-mythologize and generate a personal iconography is to have power and freedom. These are also gendered acts from her perspective, which she appropriates as a form of agency to make her own experience visible. Myles recounts how when she first arrived in New York and was considering whether to be a sex worker because of economic need and limited opportunities to make money, she realized this experience could also be turned into literature: “Only a person who thinks like me can sell her own...ass thinking she’s a cultural critic. Or even weirder feeling she’s a man. I would be a man if I wrote. And being a man would render these steps I’m taking towards a place called Tuesday’s—Tuesday’s in my masculine hands would be literature. Each little step was a coin. Ting, the door flung open. It was art” (2010: 80).

Myles does not use “facts” or “statistics” in her memoir as Wojnarowicz and Delany do in their texts to situate the narratives in historical reality. Yet her references to real people, and places, often poets and artists, have a similar effect. For example, she offers an anecdote of meeting Peter Hugar, Wojnarowicz’s closest friend and mentor, in a medical clinic. Her account lacks a tone of detached reverence, yet renders their encounter as a vivid and visceral moment, both personal and historical, in the early years of the AIDS crisis: “That day in the Polyclinic I had a boil on my ass. I met Peter Hugar, who was totally sweet (and in agony). Completely red with his skin peeling off and he was dying. That’s what he keep telling them (I am in agony and I am dying) (while he sat there for hours) and it’s also what he told me. At some point we shook hands. I have a boil on my ass, I explained” (Myles 2010: 39).

Throughout *Inferno*, Myles addresses the past from her location in the present. She follows metonymic threads that allow her to construct her narrative of remembrance. Myles explains metonymy as “proximity—an open universe, not a closed one” (Interview 2000: 28).

Nelson points out that for Myles, the use of the first-person “I” as the character “Eileen Myles” is a “metonymic move” (2007: 197). Myles explains “Instead of inventing some symbolic name for my narrator, I use a real piece of me” (Interview 2000: 28). Like Wojnarowicz and Delany, she locates herself at the heart of her archive of queer space so that the “I” of the narrative is an opening from which her memories of the past can emerge.

“I made this. I am free. I had a room”: How to Sustain Queer Freedom

In *Inferno*, Myles defines freedom in two ways. One on hand it is the opportunity to write and dedicate her life to being a poet. It is also the chance to define her own identity as a queer woman. Like Wojnarowicz and Delany, Myles turns to the work of other writers to discover how they have made themselves free. She explains, “Nobody ever told me how to live, they told me what not to do. In all these books about the lives of artists that I read I mean they weren’t guidebooks but they took the simple beliefs in art and freedom and carried them to outrageous lengths. I could do that” (Myles 2010: 75). Similar to Wojnarowicz and Delany, Myles finds freedom in queer space through heightened experiences that manifest as relational practices and queer imaginaries.

In her memoir, Myles focuses on how to sustain freedom. This focus stems from her discussion of what she needs in order to continue to be free. She identifies four elements: First, just as for Wojnarowicz and Delany, New York is essential for Myles as the site in which to exercise her freedom to be herself, which includes being out as a lesbian and a poet: “Here I was doing my laundry in New York. Watching my rags do round and round. I had escaped. Dogs on Thompson St. were barking, crazy people flying by in and out of opened doors—a couple having a fight. I was reading a book. Life was doing your laundry. It was real laundry. I mean doing it

here in the middle of urban creation. A city that never stopped” (Myles 2010: 29). Secondly, Myles’s creative and interpretive work generate the possibility of freedom:

I had to tend my new freedom carefully. Always I focused on my destiny as a poet. It sat between everything in a way that college had, yet it was my belief in poetry that kept it in focus....I wrote constantly and I was learning all the time, and I was always meeting people who were poets, mostly men, and they would tell me what to read and I would go huh and decide myself what I actually liked. And I *could* decide. Happily alone in the six inches between my eyes and the pages of a book—I had largely been cut out for this life. (Myles 2010: 29)

Thirdly, Myles requires a physical site, a shelter, in which to do her thinking, her reading, and her writing, and therefore to be free. This space is her apartment, a single room first in Soho and then in the East Village: “With the window open. The poem flapping out of a typewriter in front of me. I made this. I am free. I had a room” (Myles 2010: 30). Fourthly, Myles needs to recognize her own queer desires for women, in order to sustain her experience of freedom:

I was free and now I understood how saints and sages saw the world. Everything was fake, false. Only my pounding heart and the words it dictated could counterbalance the undermining artificiality of the world. Its fishiness. The secret of the world, the inside of it—I had evidence now—was undeniably lesbian. And every woman I knew wanted to be one. And I wanted Rose. Day in and day out. My wanting her was my wanting to be alive. (Myles 2010: 238).

It is by sustaining these freedoms that Myles sustains her own life.

“This ridiculous painting without limits was at my disposal”: Becoming Visible

Myles’s commitment to making her own experiences of being queer and female visible is in tension with the dominant culture in which she lives and writes. In these terms, as literature, her work is counterpublic. She reflects in an interview: “There was something about my particular life—as a female, as a person prone to drug and alcohol abuse, as a lesbian—that I sensed was endangered. I had a feeling nobody would know what it was like if I didn’t tell it” (Myles,

Interview 2001: n. pag.). A similar sensation and recognition of potential endangerment is also palpable in Wojnarowicz and Delany's memoir texts.

Queer visibility is fundamental to how Myles understands her identity and her work as a writer. Part of her journey in the queer spaces of New York involves becoming visible and recognized. By extension, her memoir, as a personal narrative, affirms this theme of becoming visible. As Myles describes in *Inferno*, when she first comes to New York in the mid-1970s, she understood how, "Girls are invisible. I was sitting in Alice's room in New York. No one could see me. I had just arrived" (2010: 183). The material and affective experience of being seen is a first step in Myles's narrative of becoming a writer. She makes herself and the world visible through her own perceptions, creating and representing queer spaces in her work. This is integral to her own sense of self and survival.

When Myles comes out, she realizes the visibility of experience in her poetry has also shifted towards a more intimate, embodied focus: "I knew I was writing the poems of the body now....I was filled up with love for this new world. La Vita Nuova I announced to the boys in the bar. I was full of love for that life. I was drunk on my present and future power" (Myles 2010: 183). For Myles, coming out was also about gaining new ways of seeing. The material world becomes more pliable or available in its visibility, more alive in its presence to Myles as a queer witness. She begins to perceive the queer spaces around her just as she creates them through her presence:

How would I write? I can describe the feeling: pure exaltation, a sense of being—not correct, but aligned. I experienced those days as many-colored though chiefly silver and blue. Clouds were more artificial than ever before. Nature was manic. It was laughing at me. I was suddenly stripped of a frame and now this ridiculous painting without limits was at my disposal. The buildings interfered; the white lines in the street were unbearable. It was like the world had always been this tremendous womb I was shut in, looking out. (Myles 2010: 237)

Myles understands that to make her own experiences of queer space visible by turning them into literature is a gendered act. As Ahmed notes, “Queer bodies have different access to public forms of culture, which affect how they can inhabit those publics” (2004: 151). By placing her experience in the public realm, Myles appropriates the gendered space of a literary public through her own creative devices. Her writing disrupts this space and asserts her presence in it as a queer female voice addressing a queer female public. This becomes a counterpublic gesture and expands the dimensions of queer spaces she is representing.

“A room...that contained the world”: Queer Spaces of the Poet’s Apartment

One of the key sites of queer space in Myles’s archive of memories is her East Village apartment. Myles uses the apartment for writing and turns it into a literal interior poem by wheat pasting Bill Knott’s “Poem to Myself” on the wall. She explains that the poem,

Lived there as long as I did. The poem lived widely in the public space of my head. The paint the landlord gave us was a flat inarticulate beige. A color that only covered something. But Bill’s broadside was a tiny bit brighter than its background and the wall came alive around the bloody red letters of the poem. Time to step into my office and write, time to stand there reading....I read it again and again like a prayer....It taught me to write. (Myles 2010: 68)

The queer space of the apartment situated in New York, symbolizes her choice to be living there and therefore her sense of agency. It allows her to sustain her freedom: “As somebody who had grown up in a house it took a while for me to grasp the fact of my apartment never mind a room growing in my head that contained the world” (Myles 2010: 30). The apartment becomes an extension of her mind, a site for counterpublic practice and imaginaries. It gives her the space she needs to sustain her freedom to create. As Ahmed writes, “How important it is, especially for women, to claim that space, to take up that space through what one does with one’s body. And so when I am at my table, I am also claiming that space, I am becoming a writer by taking up that

space” (2006: 11). Because Myles’s freedom is threatened, as a woman, a queer person, and someone from a working-class background, her apartment becomes, like her mind, a protective shelter and a form of defense against the hostilities she encounters. She writes: “I had to shore this first apartment up continually against everything” (Myles 2010: 30).

The queer space of Myles’s apartment is described as permeable and porous, letting in the world and the light: “Out my window were hundreds of other windows of people looking in or not. I always thought of Rear Window” (Myles 2010: 16). She adjusts the physical layout of the apartment so that she is oriented towards the window and the world outside it, even when looking in: “One evening I’m lying on my bed, the butch one. I’m watching teevee. The bed’s next to the window, so I’m looking at the tube but I’m also in the world” (Myles 2010: 213). The apartment building itself has a structural porosity, making the borders of privacy between neighbors more permeable: “The little courtyard itself was a vast plunging opera of meals and building sounds” (Myles 2010:31). Just as the space of the apartment lets in the world, the apartment is also infused with literature: “When I finally moved into an apartment in the East Village where I lived the rest of my life there was already a whole pile of stapled books on the floor. I didn’t even know to call them books yet but they were....The windows of this apartment were filled with sumac trees and it was marvelous” (Myles 2010: 202).

In Myles’s descriptions, the queer space of the apartment is her “home” in the way Ahmed defines the term: a creative, generative force, “*overflowing* and *flowing over*” (Ahmed 2006: 11). It is also a “dwelling” as Ahmed defines the concept via Heidegger: “The process of coming to reside,” or “making room,” but also “to linger, or even to delay or postpone” (Ahmed 2006: 20). A liminal quality is salient in Myles’s representations of this interior queer space. Before she comes out as a poet and a lesbian, Myles loses herself in time, alone in her apartment,

delaying or postponing in order to prepare for becoming who she is. After she comes out, the queer space of the apartment is also the place where she lingers before becoming a poet and a lesbian who is recognized by others. As such, the apartment allows her anonymity but is not placeless. Even when she is not known, by *dwelling* in her apartment, she can be situated in New York, and in her mind she is situated in meaningful relation to other famous, recognized

American writers:

When Thoreau made lists on Walden Pond measuring and figuring out he was just like me broke in my apartment in New York. No one could find me now. No one knew what I was. I was addition and subtraction: sunlight, bumpy white walls, millions of windows, Café Bustelo, my feet, the yellow phone, the foam mattress on the floor, the utility table on rolling wheels, the pink metal edged restaurant table, the mug that I liked, the coffee sock. Throw it away, grinds splashing up, beer bottles (clink), the heel of the bread. My notebook margins, a studio: beginning of a tiny place the whole world is sucked in (pulsing) in and out like a plume. Like gas—like a giant slab of stone anciently budged to let the world in and I slipped out. Now I have money. Money I wrote. I have exactly a one-dollar bill. Prop it up. (Myles 2010: 85)

The queer space of the apartment is also where Myles, as narrator, keeps her bed and her typewriter, the two main objects facilitating her identity as poet and a lesbian:

Sherri gave me a bed. Sherri was a carpenter. She wore carpenter pants and used to be a model and she was active in a group called Women in the Trades. There was a group for everything. The bed was like something that would have killed Christ. Sherri said, it is so butch. Give me that word! Giant butcher-block legs. One frame on another, distanced by these pegs. I mean, I had this bed for years. It was a gift. (Myles 2010: 195)

When she is not in the bed, she is engaged in the labour of writing on her manual typewriter, an act that is physicalized and made visceral in her representations:

I'd write a stanza and fling the carriage and it would stop more or less there, a few lines down, and I'd pick it up again. Forgetting the fact of the typewriting you do lose how much moving down a page was like sailing, the machine did stop and got to work right there (like a drill) and then it's moving over the white page, beginning again when you stopped flicking the roll that held the paper. And all of this was sound. The machine clicking and whirling, and ringing too. Also the paper, its hard scraping clack. And the white out, the smell and the spray of it on your clothes. Black jeans with faded white spots. (Myles 2010: 244-245)

Part of Myles' sense of freedom in having the queer space of the apartment as a dwelling, is that it means she is able to have the time and space to reflect on her internal state. In the apartment she comes to know herself better, to read other writers, and to compare their lives and interpretations of reality with her own: "I was collecting employment myself, nice life, waking up for morning coffee and a poem and looking out the window. A squirrel would land on my fire escape. A bird or two. I moved to this apartment in May and now it was fall and the trees were almost empty. I was preparing for my new life. La Vita Nuova...I knew the ball had fallen so I went to Oscar Wilde and bought some books" (Myles 2010: 218). The reference to La Vita Nuova is from another text by Dante. It is a set of poems that form a fictional autobiography about the narrator, identified as Dante, who is in love with a woman named Beatrice. Myles is loosely appropriating the narrative in Dante's text along with its literary and cultural associations, and applying them through intertextual reference to her own experience.

In middle age, and in the midst of her career as poet, Myles' perceives the generative capacity of life when it is witnessed and experienced as a queer space to dwell in. This generative capacity is described with language that is similar to her representations of the apartment: "Now I was just standing in the day. Had I ever considered what this was worth. Just standing in the goods. If the words I plucked out of standing here were incomplete then probably they were not 'it.' And maybe *this* was. The thing was existence itself" (Myles 2010: 270). Myles concludes that the dwelling is actually her poem. It is the shape she gives to her existence and the queer space she creates within herself: "The room was the poem, the day I was in. Oh Christ. What writes my poem is a second ring, inner or outer. Poetry is just the performance of *it*. These little things, whether I write them or not. That's the score. The thing of great value is you. *Where* you are, glowing and fading, while you live" (2010: 270).

“We were a neighborhood and we would play”: Queer Spaces of Performance

Myles associates the public spaces of performance and social connection in New York with sustaining her freedom through the queer spaces she creates there. These sites include the bars where she works in her early days in New York, and the bars, clubs, and St Marks’s Place where she attends poetry readings or parties. They are situated in the East Village, the West Village, Soho, and the Lower East Side where she spends her time. They are not rendered as explicitly queer sites in the text, but they become queer for Myles through her experiences there. At the same time she encounters exclusion and hostility within some of the queer spaces she occupies, especially in relation to how her gender and class are perceived. As a result, in *Inferno*, many of these social and performance spaces are also represented as contested, which I’ll discuss later in the chapter.

Throughout the memoir, Myles gains a partial sense of community or belonging from these public queer spaces, just as Wojnarowicz describes feeling welcome at the piers, and Delany emphasizes the social value and necessity of his interactions at the porn cinemas. The queer spaces of social connection and performance also allow her to recognize her own individuality in relation to others: “I was in public but I was totally alone. And I relished the opportunity to not be smothered. This was art” (Myles 2010: 50). Myles remembers that when she first arrived in New York: “I sat there in the afternoon, drinking bourbon, getting good and smashed, being completely open to the world in that temporary way...I had my notebook open to all the light coming in....At that moment the whole city of New York was my congenial host, I was sipping drinks and happily looking out” (2010: 33). She gets to know New York, and becomes familiar with people in the city, through her work in the bars: “Since I got here I mostly worked in bars, which was not so good for one reason, which was that I was a drunk. But I

always liked the belonging that came with work. A space towards which I was inclined, a real physical space, not the one in my mind” (Myles 2010: 32).

It is in the public, communal space of the poetry scene that Myles asserts her identity as queer: “You know I’m a lesbian and I came out in the midst of the poetry community and it wasn’t very graceful. I coped as I could. The thing I loved about being a poet was that we were a neighborhood and we would play” (2010: 110). These public communal sites of poetry are represented by Myles as open to the possibility of queerness or at least available for her to appropriate as queer. She notes the connections in these spaces that were enabled between art and sex: “When your time is uncommodified, amateur, kid, punk, unobserved, over, before, days marked useless, private, unshipped, so to speak life stays in the swarm of free-range sex shifting into art, back to sex, art again” (Myles 2010: 66). She draws loose parallels between queer spaces and spaces of poetic sensibility, both of which are covert and marginalized from the mainstream, but creatively potent and immersive for participants. Myles asserts, “We who write poetry and think about it all the time—who walk the streets that other humans walk, past pizza stands and trees, are citizens meanwhile of a secret country with its own currency that gets exchanged anecdotally, even whispered in the loud thrumming silence of the day” (2010: 65).

Myles describes how her sexual encounters with women are initiated in these queer spaces of social connection and performance. The encounters she describes happen through conversation as seduction. They are depicted differently from the way Wojnarowicz often represents meeting men through wordless encounters in the queer space of the piers. However, they are similar to Delany’s representations that emphasize the role of conversation in his social interactions at the porn cinemas. As Myles observes about seduction, “A woman prefers a story, a growing possibility, an imagined line” (2010: 238). Like both Wojnarowicz and Delany, she

represents queer social spaces as essential for private exchanges to be initiated in public. She writes:

Now I went on a little rampage in the world, standing at a party with a drink and stealthily moving the conversation over to sex and if she saw red, it was red and we immediately went out and had sex. I had no idea that this was possible, that women were as easy as men. I mean I had known it over time, but never all at once. I realized I just needed common ground and we could go have sex there. This wasn't entirely passion, but it was sex and I needed to be incredibly dirty and abandoned as possible in order to stay alive. (Myles 2010: 264)

Just like Wojnarowicz and Delany, Myles emphasizes that these queer spaces of social connection and performance, which provide access to the possibility of queer sex, are as crucial for her "to stay alive," as access to food, water and shelter.

Myles writes of how these queer spaces of social connection and performance are temporary or fleeting, but not without location, origins, or histories. They allow for one group to replace another over time, but as sites they provide a link between different communities and generations of artists and cultural producers: "Our society was a subway. There'd be a whole horde of men and women—with magazines, and readings and then the train came rumbling in and most of them got on. Then a new train came honking into the station and it was us. The people those other people had left and now we were standing there talking about them. We had their books" (Myles 2010: 201-202). This realm of social connection and performance also becomes a way for Myles to form relationships with older people who lived in New York before she arrived and who welcome her into their scene:

I was his and her young punk, a genius and for that I was fed and felt seen and went out a little loaded into the bright cold. We were carrying the message, day and night for about ten years. That's about as long as you get. The houses are open and all you need is about three of you to go everywhere and make these gauzy invisible strings between people. It just makes sense that so many of us had time during the day and would stand in one another's kitchen. Smoking and talking and watching our faces change in the light. (Myles 2010: 259)

Inferno documents how the emergence of the AIDS crisis changed the queer spaces of social connection and performance that Myles inhabited: “By 1990 everyone was dying....First Tim then on and on and on” (Myles 2010: 260). She mourns the death of her friends and mentors: “Paul was a queer who had my number. He offered me a couple of things I was barely ready to know, but in the centaur tradition of generous men he taught me. Paul was dead and his picture was there on her refrigerator....Paul died when everyone did, of AIDS” (Myles 2010: 269).

Myles’s memoir ends with her representations of the ways the AIDS crisis impacted the queer spaces she inhabited. This sudden conclusion to her text signifies how the emergence of AIDS marks an ending to her representation of queer space, just as the emergence of the epidemic was also the beginning of the end for many of the queer spaces in New York.

“I just needed someplace to go”: Queer Spaces of the Streets

Myles describes the streets of New York as queer spaces that sustain her freedom, particularly in the East Village, the West Village, Soho, and the Lower East Side. These neighborhoods connect her to the history of literary production in the city, and they allow her to feel significant even when she is unknown and impoverished as a poet. Just as Wojnarowicz and Delany describe walking the streets, and appropriating them as queer spaces in which they can explore freedom, this image is a refrain in Myles’s memoir: “I walked east. I smoked while I walked because it made time go faster and it kept people away. Not really, but it had an effect. My destinations came from the back of the *voice* where they listed readings” (Myles 2010: 47).

Myles is introduced to New York City and its literary history through the streets, which are represented as public spaces of spatial and temporal movement and also of encounter. She

recalls, “I had a work-study job....to go to the East Village with a map. It was a map of the neighborhood in 1910. I was to go to each building on the map that was still standing (between Houston and 14th Street, and I guess University Place and the East River) and get into their files....One by one I stood inside so many of these buildings and thought with a private joy: I’m on the map” (Myles 2010: 38). Myles witnesses the East Village before the major wave of gentrification begins in the late 1980s and early 1990s. She notes, “It was wonderful when something, even just an old wall, stayed. When I first saw the East Village I thought I was in Europe. I mean the real Europe. Cobble-stoned with trolley tracks down the middle of the street. Empty, old. It was totally Poland” (Myles 2010: 205). She explores the juxtaposition of different realities that the city offers, a quality that both Wojnarowicz and Delany also emphasize: “It’s the way New York is: all the realities blinking next to each other. Often you can’t see a thing” (Myles 2010: 203). This juxtaposition that Myles witnesses in New York prior to gentrification, allows for queer space through a heterogeneous mix of cultures, personalities, and economic classes. Delany explores the social significance of this heterogeneity in his memoir. All three authors use the practice of juxtaposition as a formal technique in their texts.

The streets are queer spaces for Myles that support her creative work because they are free and open and they provide her with material for her writing: “Often I rehearsed poems walking down the street. This is before cell phones, so it was just us, the performance artists and the crazy people talking to ourselves” (Myles 2010: 159). Once she inhabits the streets as queer spaces, they offer a structure to her day in the way that a labyrinth offers people a path for their journey: “Just knowing Rose was gay made my walk across Second Ave. then Houston, up past Ballato’s and turning at the Puck Building when it was old and it was September I think the most empty triumphal September....In order to start my day I had to go somewhere so I took to

walking to their place in the afternoon” (Myles 2010: 218). The streets are also the site where she recognizes her sexuality and first comes out to herself: “One morning all the leaves were gone, and this thing had just gradually happened. My daily walk, as planned: it simply turned me into a dyke. I just needed someplace to go” (Myles 2010: 219).

Myles describes that when she is in the streets, experiencing herself as queer, they become a revelatory and generative space for her creative agency: “The walk to Rose’s was a flood of details. Car coming towards me as I crossed Houston. Put a cigarette between my lips. My lungs, this very good burn going down. I rub it. Flooding my chest like a flower. Go into the bodega and pick up a couple of beers” (2010: 221). In her movement in the street she becomes more aware of her presence, the limitations and boldness of her existence, and the queer space she is occupying: “The possibility that I should keep living in this particular time in which I had been born, not bleeding into all the other times, hear this footstep, not that. Feel that possibility and let it leak. Bump into a friend. Even if he was talking and talking I can jump in and stop him” (Myles 2010: 221). As Solnit explains, the act of walking is: “The intentional act closest to the unwilling rhythms of the body, to breathing and the beating of the heart. It strikes a delicate balance between working and idling, being and doing. It is a bodily labor that produces nothing but thoughts, experiences, arrivals” (2000: 5).

It is also in the queer space of the streets that Myles realizes the power of her own voice in the social interactions she has there. When she is walking down the street she realizes, “People were hearing me now. A little bit. I liked standing up in front of room full of people giving the torrent of words I chose. But each poem was a tiny torrent. A hole. Each person was a monad, a jot” (Myles 2010: 221). Myles draws parallels between walking in the streets and her practice of writing:

I like sentences. Words. Like this walk. I don't see everything. And certainly not for the same length of time. What do I see? If I am going to be a lesbian, it will be everywhere in my work. Embedded, and I laughed. I imagined this thing called Sappho's Boat. Like a sworl being a record of all my thoughts and I could just pick one thing, not so importantly, but as you made a turn, like the rhythm, the stray junk of your existence would be momentarily displayed. (2010: 222)

It is through walking the streets that she learns more about how to write her poetry, and therefore discovers her own journey and finds her own path through the labyrinth of New York, "Like a map of your road. Throw it in the cart. Clunk. I got it, I finally got that" (Myles 2010: 222).

Myles's discovery is in keeping with Solnit's observation that:

The rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts. This creates an odd consonance between internal and external passage...It is the movement as well as the sights going by that seems to make things happen in the mind, and this is what makes walking ambiguous and endlessly fertile: it is both means and end, travel and destination. (2000: 5-6)

"I'm female, plus I'm me": Resisting Genders in Queer Space

Inferno incorporates reflections about the ways in which Myles encounters queer space as contested space. When she arrives in New York and begins to make the city her home, she discovers she has to protect her mobility and thus sustain her freedom in response to people assuming she is for sale: "When you come to the city people are afraid of you. Everyone is, I mean. They're impressed, but they're also afraid...I'm female so there was an added bit of danger people always attacked me with. Like I would find myself alone and something bad would happen. Nothing did, of course, but, economically I was pretty naked. Once people saw how broke I was they decided I was for sale" (Myles 2010: 21).

In Myles's experiences, public space as queer space is a contested one in terms of class and gender. She describes how "I believed that because I worked for things I was safe. Meaning

strong. To Abe I just looked poor. To him I was like some white female lump to be bartered in this gross exchange” (Myles 2010: 23). Abe offers to set her up to be a surrogate womb (Myles 2010: 23). Another woman offers Myles a job as a sex worker, which she considers, but after having sex with the customer doesn’t take his money (Myles 2010: 20). Myles’s realization about how often she is perceived as a bodily object to be purchased because she is young, female, and without money, is similar to Wojnarowicz’s experience as a hustler. However, because of her gender, the sense of objectification is more pervasive and less connected to her own queer desires. Similarly, Myles talks about how the boundary between sustaining her freedom to be a poet, and selling or trading a piece of herself, is often made unstable by the pressures she has to negotiate in order to survive:

I had a bottom line and it wasn’t even food, but once food was gone, I began the scramble to keep cigarettes and coffee in the picture, but finally absolutely rent. Tony told me that he sucked the landlord’s cock to pay his....Our landlord had an office on the first floor....rent was so cheap. It seemed kind of cool to have a building full of sluts. Everyone helping each other. I kind of admired him for that. But when he said my name in this leading way...I kind of froze...His question gave me a thin feeling like only a hairnet or a piece of wet gauze separated me from the world. From being a poor sorry bum. (2010: 31-32)

For Myles, as for Wojnarowicz, the choices of what sacrifices she is willing to make for survival hinge on her sense of whether they will interfere in sustaining her freedom.

In *Inferno*, queer space is also a contested space because of how her gender is perceived. For example, Myles writes about negotiating her lesbian identity in relation to building a successful career as a poet: “I was meanwhile trying to learn to be a poet, and didn’t want to be waylaid into being gay because I wouldn’t be taken seriously. There were lesbian poetry magazines...but clearly it was a trickle and it might dry up. You didn’t want to get caught there” (2010: 191-192). At the same time she finds that feminist lesbian spaces seem to exclude her own sense of identity: “The Amazon poets were fucking freaky. Plus it wasn’t just being

lesbians. It was poet planet. It was weird times weird. Lesbian poets were so devotional. Like it was all a big act. Almost like nuns. It was hard to believe they really liked it so much. . . . It was just this whole culture of goodness and suffering, no one ever being bad. That was the stance” (Myles 2010: 53). She does not feel like she has much in common with the feminist poets in her community, even though some of them were queer. “The feminists seemed so serious, even when it was about sex. They taught in college and seemed rich. They just weren’t hip” (Myles 2010: 203). The feminist space becomes a contested space for her queerness because there seems to be no room for her own experience of gender: “A thing that was always so difficult about feminism was that it didn’t contain a boy. Nobody wanted to deal with that part, so I just always felt dirty and poor. A boy was my secret part, so where should I put that? Even if I was a feminist I would still have a [sic] evil secret baby. Myself” (Myles 2010: 199).

In Myles’s descriptions of women’s spaces, there is a sense of fluidity and movement as she traverses them, but also a profound sense of restlessness with being gendered as female, and a subtle sense of despair and resistance that arises from the confines of this gender identity: “I felt there was a lot of dropping from one pot into the next. From one pot of woman to another” (2010: 191). This sense of despair also emerges in a different context, when she is younger. An acquaintance, another woman her age, tries to recruit her to do sex work. They both negotiate a sense of desperation as they weigh their hopes and desires in relation to needing to make money to survive: “I felt behind this girl-exchange we were having was a huge depression, a mountain of despair was watching her coming at me, her strange manic hopes and her stupid notebook creeping closer and closer by the moment. I was waiting for her to say do you want to hear my poem and then I would sit there sipping my Hennessy’s listening to her obvious poetry and all because I was broke” (Myles 2010: 17).

In Myles's memoir, the social space of the community she chooses, and the queer space she inhabits there, are also characterized by hostility in terms of the exclusion of women: "I felt the guys I knew were so in love with our story that they couldn't imagine being outside of it like I did all the time. Thing is, I am outside. I'm female, plus I'm me.... It was like I had entered a room and everyone else knew I entered some other room. My mistake was that I forgot I was female" (2010: 59, 64).

Myles realizes that her desire is to appropriate masculinity as her own contested queer space. Masculinity becomes permeable in her description, something to get inside of and become. To appropriate masculinity allows her to alter both her self-perception and the way she is perceived by others: "I was thinking today that I have spent my whole life trying to be a man. I'm sure you don't understand what I mean by that. I think I was examining my behavior (as wrong) and imagining how some man would do it. I realized I thought he was right, somehow. Why do I think that. If I crawl inside of the head of a man, (and eat his thoughts alive) will I begin to live my life correctly. What will I do with the woman" (Myles 2010: 184). Internally and intuitively, Myles experiences herself as two genders at once. Yet the question of what to do with her female identity in relation to her sense of masculinity remains open throughout the narrative.

As Myles inscribes her own personal history in New York and its queer spaces, the visibility of her experience allows her to critique these spaces. She discusses the importance of money and class privilege in the cultural scenes in New York that she was part of, and in the cultural landscape of the city. In New York, a site starts in one location and when it has to move to another, it "keeps its old name because that's what it is and also it becomes an occasion for New Yorkers to boast" (Myles 2010: 32). People like to say they lived or visited the original site:

The story becomes sort of an arch for the older person to talk under and the new people to stand around there and listen. And then step through and walk on. But some of it sticks. Always the new city grows as the old one is shrinking and a person's ability to arrive in some comfortable state with both cities has a lot to do with money. Not necessarily having it, but having a good relationship with it. Either you step down into the city from a large comfortable loft, or apartment, or an entire building in Brooklyn and feel the city likes you, or else you are in possession of a small rent-stabilized apartment in Manhattan. Or even a hotel room. (Myles 2010: 32-33)

Myles reflects on the importance of class interaction, or "contact" as Delany refers to it in his memoir, for supporting the cultural scene she was part of. She recalls in her discussion with Cooper, that: "In the seventies it had seemed like wealthy people actually *liked* to have pet poets and poorer people around and young people....there wasn't a sense that poverty was a contagion. And that feeling's been gone for a long time" (Afterword 2006: 470-471). Like Delany, in her memoir Myles focuses on how there was more space for interclass contact before gentrification made New York unaffordable for many artists and cultural workers: "Often the person in the loft and the little apartment or room know each other. That is the tradition of cool. Because the rich people need poor friends (but not too poor!) to maintain their connection to the struggle that spawned them even if they never struggled....An artist's responsibility for a very long time is to get connected, socially" (2010: 33). Part of how Myles contends with contested queer space is by fostering social connections that can help to support her life as a poet, and affirm her experiences of queerness.

"It was still much better to destroy things": Performing Queer Failure

One of the reasons Myles's archive of queer spaces is significant is that it can be theorized as an expression of radical queer negativity. This form of expression resonates with the queer punk movement she was part of in New York. It also characterizes a particular moment in queer history that coincides with the sense of queer shame produced by homophobia and AIDS.

Myles's counterpublic perspectives, informed by her identity as a butch lesbian and as a poet, enable her to transform a feeling of failure into a liberating experience. Her own recognition of failure in the context of heteronormativity, patriarchy, and a version of feminism that insists on women as inherently flawless, is a means to sustain freedom. Her sense of the liberating possibilities of certain kinds of queer failure defines her expression of radical queer negativity.

As a poet, Myles understands that failure is part of her chosen medium of self-expression. In examining a poet's life as buttressed "waste," Myles returns to the image of the window: "The poet's life is just so much crenellated waste, nights and days whipping swiftly or laboriously past the cinematic window" (2010:65). Just as she used the image of the window to develop metaphors of creative form as well as performance, and to convey the porosity of the private space of the apartment in which she writes, here the image is associated with filmic qualities, which are also prevalent in Wojnarowicz's memoir as a reoccurring motif. For Myles, the window is the space in which the waste of the poet's life is witnessed as a collage of moments in space and time.

Myles realizes that to develop as a poet and become recognized for her work by others, she has to inhabit spaces of failure, including countless poetry readings and open stages: "It was clear that I could only venture into this world if I was alone....one day I knew I would be famous. These scenes were part of it—pushing into the unknown, even if it meant sitting in a room full of creeps, in used leftover looking spaces waiting for my turn" (2010: 49). These "used leftover looking spaces" are also a reflection of the aesthetic expression of queer punk and in turn, and they feed the tradition of radical queer negativity. As Myles argues,

People claim Bill Knott was the inspiration for punk. Bill was a total hero of Tom Verlaine and Richard's in the seventies, and his style was totally like theirs. So was Patti Smith's. Romantic messy boy. The hair totally Kurt. You could see it back then, but it was so normal to be messy that you didn't quite know it was a style. It was more like

catchy. Next day you'd find a shirt like that lying on top of a trash can. It was only for you. (2010: 69)

The way in which Myles links failure and style is part of a tradition of radical queer negativity. In theorizing this tradition, Halberstam recalls the assertion of the queer icon Quentin Crisp in the late 1960s: "If at first you don't succeed, failure may be your style," (Crisp 1968: 196). Halberstam explains that Crisp "makes the crucial link between failure and style and, in his own effeminate persona, embodies that link as gender trouble, gender deviance, gender variance" (2009: 96). Myles is extending the radical queer negativity of Crisp and Warhol in her archive by redefining it through her perspective and experiences as a queer woman. Just as in Myles's approach, Halberstam notes that for both Crisp and Warhol, "failure presents an opportunity rather than a dead end; in true camp fashion, the queer artist works with rather than against failure" (2009: 96).

One of the forces that energized Myles's use of radical queer negativity was the moment of queer punk which coincided with the moment of queer shame in the 1980s in the midst of the AIDS epidemic. Nelson explains that, "Often Myles places herself in the very center of shame's sickening swirl and charts the action from its inside" where "repetition is one of shame's closest allies" (2007: 199-200). Nelson describes how Myles transforms or journeys through different affective responses to her gendered self as the "practice" of "a sort of alchemy" (Nelson 2007: 194). These responses to gender identity, "Venture into hatred and ambivalence and come out with desire, with all its wild markings. In doing so, they avoid a polar situation, and Myles's masculine and feminine identifications are nothing if not fluid" (Nelson 2007: 194). Of her friend, Myles offers, "She was punk, everyone was...Everybody was just against everything—so as much as we loved...it was still much better to destroy things" (2010: 214). Destruction has the potential to provide creative liberation and originality in her work. Myles channels failure into a

dismantling of conventions, but she, like Wojnarowicz and Delany, still holds a reverence for form, expression, and the significance of creative traditions within American culture. This is in part what makes their texts cultural products of America and preoccupied by American society, even as the authors have experienced marginalization for manifesting counterpublic practices and imaginaries in their work. As Ahmed articulates, “To create queer space is not to be “free” of norms or “outside the circuits of exchange within global capitalism. *It is the nontranscendence of queer that allows queer to do its work*” (2004: 165).

Myles addresses radical queer negativity through her identity as a lesbian just as she does through her identity as a poet. This is in keeping with Halberstam’s conceptualization of how queer women, particularly artists, writers, and performers, can experience their failure as women to be liberating: “Where feminine success is always measured by male standards, and gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals, not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures” (2009: 4). As Myles represents herself entering middle age in *Inferno*, and looks back over her life through her memoir, she confronts her sense of ruination, reiterating her appreciation of her existence as “waste” in the context of patriarchal culture and capitalism:

Like a spilt glass of milk, my life. A white pool shimmering on the floor. My corrupt womanhood: a waste. I feel the same way about being a writer. Staying up all night burning my brain cells, for years, swallowing tons of cheap speed, also for years, eating poorly, pretty much drinking myself to death. And then not. Contracting whatever STD came to me in the seventies, eighties, nineties, smoking cigarettes, a couple of packs a day for at least twenty years, being poor and not ever really going to the doctor (only the dentist: flash teeth), wasting my time doing so little work, being truly dysfunctional. (2010: 142)

Myles’s emphasis on her use of drugs and alcohol can be understood as an expression of radical queer negativity. As Muñoz writes, “Drugs are a surplus that pushes one off course, no longer able to contribute labor power at the proper tempo. Here, again, surplus is not simply an additive;

it distorts—a stuttering particularity that shoves one off course, out of straight time” (2009: 154-55). Similarly, Myles’s emphasis on surplus and waste is tied to the ways in which her own existence and her dwelling in queer spaces are resistant to straight time and capitalist production as queer woman, as a poor person, and as a poet: “Wasting my time doing so little work, being truly dysfunctional” (2010: 142). Implicit to this statement is a critique of the way the capitalist system limits and devalues poor people and working artists, just as heteronormativity limits and devalues queers who resist assimilation. In a sense, being “dysfunctional” reflects the dysfunctional system in which American society dwells and the dysfunction of its inequitable structures of power in terms of gender, race, and class. This witnessing of dysfunction is also a sentiment that Wojnarowicz expresses in his text when he talks about his responses to the “pre-invented world,” and it is present in Delany’s critique of the so-called “redevelopment” of Times Square.

Myles’s sense of her queer identity as failure and waste in her contemporary society is a characteristic she revels in through her expression of radical queer negativity. She perceives traces of failure and waste in other lesbians when she is first coming out: “I was so curious about what they knew, and it was kind of like a deformity, something I shouldn’t look at in the street but I couldn’t help but staring. I felt I’d go crazy. There was all this feminist stuff about lesbians and witches, but you know there really was something to it. They were all off dancing in the dark somehow. Cackling around a light. Somewhere it was happening” (Myles 2010: 190-191). As Muñoz comments, “controversial sexual comportment and aesthetic experimentation” are both “linked to a poetics of failure” (2009: 159). It is this linkage that Myles often plays with in her memoir as she describes constructing a reputation in public as a queer female poet.

When Myles conveys herself as fully inhabiting her own queer identity, she also fully inhabits the failure it represents in American society. In so doing, she conveys her counterpublic opposition and challenge to the values and normative regimes of gentrification as a material and social process. She describes this stance and sense of self as: “Being a dyke, in terms of the whole giant society, just a fogged human glass turned on its side. Yak yak yak a lesbian talking. And being rewarded for it. Not only wasted, but useless, rancid, a wreck. It has come to me slow....I was actually pretty hard working and nervous in my forties and still thought it was possible to be good, to get it right, to win” (Myles 2010: 143). She has realized since her forties, that the success she aspired to on the terms enforced by dominant culture does not coincide with how she understands and experiences her identity: “I am destroyed. A shattered boat of a person. A broken window here, a lousy bell there. An old crappy dyke with half a brain leaking a book. A drippy excrescence. A schmear” (Myles 2010: 143). She emphasizes her own sense of self-wreckage, and it is through this self-perception that she represents how her freedom and visibility can be sustained in queer space.

Using the characteristics of radical queer negativity, Myles incorporates excessive, intense feeling and content. She rails against herself, recognizing her flaws with clarity and even appreciating them on a certain level because they get closer to conveying the truth of who she experiences herself to be:

I felt it could be me. Not only wasted but partial. A blur on the handle. I wrote the first chapter of this book, my fucking inferno, and New York blew up. If I died tomorrow I could really care less. I'd be relieved. Look at me: My face is an old catcher's mitt. Blam. Thunk. Reactions and dents. A cold bent lighthouse. Brrr. A melancholy lava lamp. A woman. A man. A butch. A bitch. Rots of ruck. Watching the fragments float by for years. I'm done. (Myles 2010: 143)

As Halberstam explains in her definition of radical queer negativity, “There is something powerful in being wrong, in losing, in failing, and...all our failures combined might just be

enough, if we practice them well, to bring down the winner....The concept of practicing failure perhaps prompts us to discover our inner dweeb, to be underachievers, to fall short to get distracted, to take a detour, to find a limit, to lose our way, to forget, to avoid mastery” (2001: 120-21). Halberstam also posits failure as anti-authoritarian and communal in scope, without ideals (2001: 120-21). In describing herself, Myles is engaging and reaching out to readers who may also experience their identities as different kinds of failures, who have witnessed themselves in this way, and experienced the shame that comes with this realization.

Myles’s representations of queer female identity in relation to expressions of radical queer negativity are inclusive. She addresses her own sense of failure as a butch-identified queer woman, and also offers up queer femininity as liberating failure when she describes a fellow poet, Susie: “She brings the feminine to an all time low then she just stands there and screams. You can’t help laughing at her work in all its purposeless bravery....Ratty dresses, bad plumbing and glitter. Her poem is an antique thing. She just *has* a very interesting mind. It’s all ‘way.’ Her poems show how we plow through fields of garbage. I continue to learn a lot from her” (Myles 2010: 213-214). In her archive of memories of queer space expressed through radical queer negativity, Myles is creating diverse and accessible queer models of anti-assimilation that celebrate and witness the value of human lives lived queerly on the edges of normative systems.

Excessiveness as the mode of expression that signifies radical queer negativity, also typifies Myles’s writing in *Inferno*. She crafts this experience for literary use. The language and tone of heightened emotion, sensation, and energy in Myles’s writing are also elements of her expression of radical queer negativity. Not only does she feel in excess, but she reveals excessively. She shares her private thoughts and emotions including shame, and turns this emotion into an assertion of humanness rather than a threat to her sense of self-worth. She

explains that: “Writing is just what I do to frame my longing. I replace myself. The longer I live the deeper it goes. It seems it will never end this feeling. I throw a stone down and nothing ever comes up I don’t even get circles” (Myles 2010: 255). The sense of being engulfed by feeling is significant for radical queer negativity because excessive queer melancholy or desire as lust and longing are difficult to repress and to assimilate within heteronormative frameworks. As Myles declares in *Inferno*: “I have an overly determined relationship to sex. I have too much feeling. Not such deep feeling, but a lot. The quakes in my body are so remarkable this must be love” (2010: 120). In a short narrative from the third section of the text, entitled “my revolution,” Myles describes her lovers in excessive sexual detail—their physical attributes, their personalities, their styles, as if producing a graphic catalogue (2010: 232-236). The women appear as objects and subjects at once, each erotically individual and sexually exceptional as she remembers them. The catalogue is similar in approach to Delany’s many descriptions of his lovers in the porn cinemas, offering brief snapshots of intimate qualities that are both erotic and humanizing in their queer representations.

In *Inferno*, when Myles recognizes her queer desire and names it as such, making it a real experience, she also experiences her own failure, in terms of weakness, which comes as a great relief and also a humbling recognition, “I had always felt kind of tough, but now I was just a faggot. That was it. I felt like a gay man. I didn’t feel any stronger being lesbian. I felt weak. Look at me god, I cried out” (2010: 219). In talking with her friend Rene Ricard, Myles embraces the meaning of “queer,” as opposed to “gay,” because it most explicitly expresses her sense of radical negativity:

Rene explained to me about being gay. We were at the MOMA....I’m not gay he said with his hands in his pockets. I’m not gay at all, he said. Are you? No, I said. Who would want that. I shook my head. I think it’s horrible. I’m not *happy*. I’m never happy. I’m sad. I like queer better. We’re *queer*. This is what we get. We have all these beautiful things.

He waved his hand at everything there. These are ours. We stood a moment in Rene's church. (2010: 255)

In this passage, the rendering of "queer" in terms of radical negativity is also associated with a collective experience that has the potential to be counterpublic and unassimilated into heteronormative culture. When the characters of Myles and Rene discuss what queer identity means, they define it as something communal, referring to themselves as "we," though they understand the meaning of queerness through individual experience (Myles 2010: 255).

When she recognizes her own queer identity, Myles perceives it as a source of both pleasure and pain, two sides of radical queer negativity: "I was in it with Rose. She had hurt me grievously and now I was forever attached. I was in it now with all the women in the world. I walked home glad. I will die, I thought with a bounce in my step. I'm whole. Not whole like anyone else, but whole like me. Painful, but simple. It was very simple now" (2010: 231).

Myles also expresses radical queer negativity in terms of the public, social queer space that she was part of in New York. In reflecting on the past, pre-AIDS, she recalls the exclusion she experienced along with her friends and lovers. They had wanted to stage a play at "Club 57 on St. Mark's Place" but were "totally booed by those gay men. I think it was why we were invited. Lesbians in general were verboten on this scene. You had to hide yourself in gay culture" (Myles 2010: 113). Or another time her friends played a show at Irving Plaza: "It was a great great scene with Klaus Nomi, and Lance Loud probably Ann; everyone who was vanguard cool at that time" (Myles 2010: 113). But it doesn't go well: "Tim and Rose set up their little pig nose amp and began and in a few seconds the audience started throwing shit at them. It was a set-up. They kept trying to play for a while until it was clear to everyone of us who were high and proud like a sick family that we were a joke. The point is that you can be queer, but really be queer in the wrong way" (Myles 2010: 113).

As Myles notes, in the contemporary moment, radical queer negativity has become more acute and subversive as a counterpublic practice: “So much of the ‘literary’ world is today against our thing. Yet Maxine Hong Kingston says the beggar king always sits on his throne in rags. I mean—if you were told that you could live that way—in a house entirely torn open, gutted. Something that doesn’t so much rule the world, but generates it—well, what *would* you do?” (Myles 2010: 69-70). This is the site of radical queer negativity that Myles writes her *Inferno* from. It is a queer space that is “entirely torn open” and “gutted” just like queer spaces in New York including the piers, the porn cinemas of Times Square, the queer clubs, and the queer bars. It is a generative place but also a wrecked and dismantled one. Like Wojnarowicz and Delany, Myles steps inside these dismantled queer spaces when she chooses to, through her memories. In this sense, the three authors are each queer beggar kings of memory, revisiting queer spaces that have already been “torn open, gutted,” and tracing their experiences of this occupation through recollection.

“The only refuge which is the impossible moment of being alive”: A Creaturely Self

I argue that *Inferno* represents the concept of creatureliness as an expressive mode through Myles’ descriptions of finding her own poetic voice. Creaturely expression can also be theorized in Myles’s writing as offering strategies for sustaining freedom and visibility in relation to queer space.

Describing her poetic practice as a young writer, in the queer space of her apartment, Myles uses the concept of creatureliness to convey the creative drive and inspiration “guiding” her: “I lay there in the hot New York night writing my poem to Alice, to Susie, to everyone I knew—about being—not in literature, not in relation to some historical form, or even art. I’m

alive in life and I'm...walking its dog. Some profound creatureliness was guiding me. I began to understand a poem as a performance of that. I looked out the window. And it loved me. Everything went wiggle-wiggle" (2010: 215). This creatureliness is situated in Myles's experience and in her "being" and inhabiting space. The poem is an act of spatial representation and relationship, a "performance" of the creatureliness she is channeling in order to write. The image of the "window" is repeated here, conveying the openness and porosity of the private, internal queer space that the narrator experiences in her apartment as she is writing her poems.

In this passage describing creaturely life, Myles witnesses herself loved by the world, just as she witnesses the creaturely within herself as a poet. The world becomes animated or reanimated through her perceptions and creative acts. When "everything went wiggle-wiggle," there is potential for intervention in the normative, through Myles's vision as poet, which is her look "out the window" (2010: 215).

Myles's sense of her own creatureliness is linked to experiences of desire as revelation in the midst of a "hot New York night." This sense is generated through her relational existence to others and her located existence both in the queer space of her apartment and in the contested public queer spaces of social connection and performance in New York City. Her attention, in writing the poem, is focused on public space just outside her window where the world moves. Looking out and looking in at once, she witnesses what is going on. She elaborates on the creatureliness she has found in herself, "If I don't hear things again and again, I don't see how the poem can really be a place....Each instance added landscape. You can literally make conviction, just with words. I got it one night" (Myles 2010: 215). In this statement, words become signifiers of space, generating location, just as Myles appropriates queer space and gives it certain meanings and associations through her memories and representations.

The physicality of the creaturely as it appears in Wojnarowicz's memoir through the use of the term "leaning," also appears in Myles's *Inferno*. Both authors use the terms of the creaturely to convey the act of relinquishing oneself to "love" and to relational connection, even as they also become vulnerable in this queer dynamic because they give up a sense of self-control. In Myles's narrative, she considers this creaturely stance as she tries to negotiate her queer sexuality with her work as a poet. This reckoning leads her to reflect on her relationship with her family and what she longs for in that lost connection: "I thought of when my whole family went to BC to hear my brother give a speech and he blacked out. That was my family. Gone. Yet we were together. I would choose the goneness now, like bowing my head to love" (Myles 2010: 221).

Linking her creaturely poetic practice with the queer poetic tradition begun in Sappho's work, she argues that this ancient queer archive now exists only in partial, dismantled, and appropriated forms: "This is the story of Sappho. Each piece we've got and most of it was destroyed is full of holes. Sappho didn't write tiny poems with giant leaps. They were torn. Everybody, mostly men...has been filling her holes ever since. She said...well actually you can say Sappho said anything. She says about two words and then everyone, the world, jumps in" (Myles 2010: 220-21).

To revisit a queer archive from the past, as Myles does in her consideration of Sappho's poetry, becomes a creaturely act in *Inferno*. Myles' poetic practice, inspired by the queer archive of Sappho's work, is guided by a "profound creatureliness" (Myles 2010: 215). It also emerges through the physical image of the poet's creaturely stance: "Simply indicate the movement without representing every little bit. It would be like leaning in occasionally to say you were

there....shifting your weight to keep the slope. To say in some gravitational way you would use all the things that poems have” (Myles 2010: 244).

Just as in Wojnarowicz’s memoir where the creaturely act of creation as intervention is one of “leaning,” Myles’s memoir emphasizes the creaturely stance in her descriptions of writing poems. In a direct address to the reader, she describes the surface of these poems and the way they move in space and time: “But look. I’ll show you the page. The thing that happened in the new poems was this feeling I had that Sappho was like an overhead view of water across which something had moved, and you could see it like this. Dip your finger into the water, causing a spiral. And how you would preserve a pattern like that...it would be to pick points along the swirling line almost like a constellation that would simply indicate the movement without representing every little bit” (Myles 2010: 244). In this passage, the “dip” of finger represents a “creaturely act,” a “leaning in,” intervening in the normative systems experienced as states of emergency. The intervention of the “dip” triggers movement and change, “causing a spiral” or labyrinth formation, which is the narrative shape Myles has appropriated for her text by explicitly associating it with Dante’s *Inferno*.

The poet is associated with creatureliness in her stance as creator who moves with and against the contested dynamics of the queer spaces she occupies. Her “leaning” is like an elemental negotiation with the earth’s gravity. Similarly, the poem itself is “turning too,” reflecting her own posture as she performs the work she has created for an audience (Myles 2010: 244, 245). In performance she takes a creaturely stance, a queer rather than a straight posture: “You turn a little aside and absorb the room’s silence” (Myles 2010: 245).

In Myles’s description of the “turning” poem, it becomes a creaturely element of resistance and agency pulled from within (2010: 244). Myles describes this poem as a

“performance” of the creatureliness, in terms of a “pulsing” physical movement: “Words, lines, stanzas. But all of it would be pulsing—the poem would get fat for a moment, and then trickle and stop—picking up over here, or down there” (2010: 215, 244). The associations she draws with her language of “pulsing” connote motions of swelling and release. Creatureliness in this context is associated with both external physical actions such as leaning or bending, and with internal actions of emoting. The creaturely poem, created and performed, is expressed as a channel, “a pump” of “memories and reading or re-experiencing,” which are the actions that Myles is also using to write her *Inferno* (Myles 2010: 244, 245): “The words still a pump from the poet’s inside, pumping blind” (Myles 2010: 245). This creaturely act of “pumping,” similar to the creaturely stance of leaning, is both an essential act of agency for the poet, coming from inside her, but also a relinquishing of control because she is “blind”.

When Myles considers the queer archive of Sappho’s poetry, she experiences a desire to intervene in the material as it is represented and recorded in the contemporary moment: “Now these little containers, things that tell us, from so many centuries ago. Ancient broken pots. By the time I got my hands on one, when that occurred I just sort of wanted to cuff the white space of it. You know, knock it around” (2010: 245). Myles comes to this archive with a desire for more, which is also a creative desire “to produce the kind of glancing and wincing and exclaiming—to depict a world of so many surfaces,” rather than sit with its silences, its “white space” (2010: 245). The suggestion here is that the queer archive itself, the creaturely record that poet and poem represent in *Inferno*, should not be considered as a collection to preserve, but approached for the ways in which they are alive in the present. She observes that poetry: “lives in the present, it breathes there and that’s how you let anyone in. I think people can feel this accessing of time in poetry very readily. As soon as the poem ceases to be about anything, when

it even stops saving things, stops being such a damn collector, it becomes an invite to the only refuge which is the impossible moment of being alive” (Myles 2010: 268).

What Myles wants to glean, and what she tries to interpret from the ancient queer archive of Sappho’s poetry, are the elements which make the archive “a world of so many surfaces, wider than a book,” reflecting the creaturely in flight with the “pulsing” of wings in movement (2010: 245). In this recording of possibility, Myles concludes, “the world’s pouring would have to be a curve, the line would be running, cursive, infinity a fight. The words needed to splinter off in some way just to describe it, so that any one poem would be a surge and nothing more, an intrepid break in time” (2010: 245). Here “the world’s pouring” suggests another form of leaning, echoing the creaturely stance in its “curve” (Myles 2010: 245). The creative act is again characterized by agency and resistance—as the “running” and “cursive” action that requires the will of the writer or performer, and the “fight” of infinity, of time moving forward and moving in on itself (Myles 2010: 245).

In Myles representation of her interaction with the ancient queer archive of Sappho’s poetry, which she records in her queer archive of memories of queer space in New York at the end of the 20th century, the poet and the poem are creaturely elements, both alive, “pumping blind” and “turning” (2010: 245). The world, as the queer space in which they are situated, reflects their creaturely stance as it “pours” and “curves” their writing into being. The creatureliness of the poet then becomes the poem.

Creaturely expression in Myles’s memoir can be theorized and interpreted as an attempt to sustain her freedom through visibility. In an interview she explains her appreciation of the potential for writing to cause a disturbance and an intervention in public space: “In this writing, by virtue of its success, it’s deemed a failure. In the writing that I love there’s this quality of

being disturbed and needing to disturb, or it's just being human. An inbetweenness of forms or genres or class or sexualities. Inappropriate" (Myles, Personal Interview 2012). Lesbian identity, in Myles's understanding, becomes a counterpublic experience. As she comments about lesbian culture in the 1990s: "What was a lesbian? It wasn't a place but a whole world of connections. Suddenly there was a new license to be punk and kind of tranny that was written into a lesbian aesthetic" (Afterword 2006: 479-480). I argue that this disturbance Myles identifies in the writing she loves is conveyed in *Inferno* as a creaturely element. It intervenes in the heteronormative present that is experienced by Myles as a state of emergency. The quality of "inbetweenness" in this writing Myles describes is also a creaturely stance like leaning, which is counterpublic in its resistance to normative categories of representation.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Queer Spatial Temporalities and the Reparative Impulse

To conclude my dissertation I focus on the ways in which Myles, Delany, and Wojnarowicz explore representations of queer space in relation to queer time. I argue that the three authors become pivoting subjects within their memoirs, bearing witness to the past in order to express the reparative possibilities of queer spatial futures.

As pivoting subjects looking forward and back, the authors construct a sense of simultaneity in their representations of spatial temporality. Drawing on Sedgwick's notion of the reparative impulse, I consider the simultaneity of spatial temporalities in the three memoirs as an expression of the narrators' desires for queer counterpublic histories enacted in the future. I also theorize how the states of spatial temporality in Myles, Delany, and Wojnarowicz's memoirs are made possible through expressions of radical queer negativity and creaturely life.

In *Inferno (A Poet's Novel)*, Myles imagines her past, present, and future, in terms of queer space. By witnessing herself in queer spaces, and conveying her memories of them, she marks the significance of the past in her present. When Myles imagines the future, she is imagining both herself and the queer spaces she inhabits or traverses. The East Village is for Myles, "where I lived the rest of my life" (2010: 202). Her apartment exists in the past where it is remembered and represented in her memories, but it also exists in the future because it is the space where she asserts she will always live (Myles 2010: 202).

Recalling herself at age twenty-five, sitting in bar in the afternoon with her notebook open soon after her arrival in New York, she explains: "Never again, not once did I ever step into that bar again. I would habitually gaze through the open doors—while I'm walking my dog,

coming home from a party. The bar changed names. It always feels like she's in there. Getting gloriously drunk in the afternoon. And I have to smile at her pleasure. Cause it's new" (Myles 2010: 34). The representation of spatial temporality in this memory hovers in time, though it is also anchored to a concrete location in a neighborhood, a street, and a building that haven't been demolished yet or gentrified in ways that have altered them completely. This memory is depicted as one that can be revisited throughout the narrator's life. However, it is also significant that because the physical environment which held the queer space has remained the memory of her experiences there is more accessible.

In the present and future, the queer space of the bar and the counterpublic experiences it generated hold different meanings. But the initial experience Myles had that was "new" to her still remains. The vital quality of this "new" experience in the present, which continues to exist into the future each time it is witnessed, depends upon how it incorporates space and time together. In an interview Myles emphasizes how a representation of queer space is simultaneously a representation of queer time:

Sometimes I think when we're talking about queer spaces we're talking about time and waste as much as queerness. Because I think that some of the aesthetic extensions of the beliefs of what we're calling a queer space in this conversation are adherence to a kind of dawdling and alterations of time, looking too long at something, jumping quickly over something else, really creating a terrain so that you will know what it feels like to be in that body and consciousness. You're not going to be tagging it all the time saying here's a lesbian reality. Instead it's a structure. (Personal Interview 2012)

Myles's use of the temporality of her own experience as a structuring device for her representations of queer spaces is also a characteristic of Wojnarowicz and Delany's memoirs.

In *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*, Wojnarowicz writes about discovering how to contend with past trauma by making it visible in the present. He is therefore able to reexamine his traumatic memories in light of new knowledge and experiences gained

later in life: “As one grows older, things tend to look less monumental, and things looking less monumental doesn’t always have to do with vision. It can be affected by thought processes and analysis.... Breaking the silence about an experience can break the chains of the code of silence” (Wojnarowicz 1991: 152-53). This aim that Wojnarowicz articulates, to be open and focused on moving towards a liberating future through self-revelation, is a crucial aspect of all three authors’ memoirs. It is the basis from which Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles make their own queer counterpublic experiences visible.

In *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, Delany’s return to his memories of the past in order to release them into the present and future becomes a central aspect of his representations of queer spatial temporality. He transforms the temporal framework of his memories into a spatial metaphor using the notion of *periplum*:

The dual pieces here present a sociological and diachronic periplum. They are two attempts by a single navigator to describe what the temporal coastline and the lay of the land looked like and felt like and the thoughts he had while observing them. From the most peremptory landings, these pieces register impression and ideas as they occurred to this navigator, somewhat storm-tossed over thirty-odd years, who finally sought something no less necessary to his appetitive life than good food and fresh water. (Delany 1999: xviii)

For Delany, and for the future readers he envisions encountering his text, the function of the “temporal coastline” as a spatial metaphor for the temporality of his memories addresses the significance of returning to the past in order to learn from it. He encourages the use of his memoir as “a *periplum*” to revisit and revise the queer spaces that he celebrates, elegizes, and critiques. Like Myles and Wojnarowicz, Delany declares that by recording the memories of his own experiences for a public, he has documented a queer space from the past that others can return to and rediscover on their own terms. Just like the universes of his science fiction, the queer spaces depicted in his memoir combine observations about the past as he remembers it,

with his vision of what these spaces from his memory could potentially be in the present, and what impact they might have for the future. In each recollection of a queer space from the past, he is engaged in a dialectical critique of the present.

Through their expressions of radical queer negativity as charged, relational and difficult forms of affect that engage with failure, each of the memoirs can be understood to challenge Edelman and Bersani's notions of queer negativity as an anti-relational approach to the future (Edelman 2004; Bersani 2009). While Edelman and Bersani contribute to an anti-relational thesis by contending that queerness should exist outside of the social order and as external to narratives of the future used to make meaning, the three memoirs convey a pull toward the future in relational and material terms. Edelman and Bersani argue that queerness, fully realized, is oppositional to politics and the logic of political opposition because both are aspects of the social order. Conversely, Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles perform political critique and analysis by presenting embodied material experiences of quotidian queer life through space and time. In the memoirs, queer life takes place within the social order, in conflictual political resistance to its structures of power and regimes of normativity.

By conceiving of a reparative future, Myles, Delany, and Wojnarowicz's expressions of radical queer negativity are immersed in the social and the political contexts in which the narrators survive and struggle. In their representations of queer experience through time and space, the narratives bear witness to the past in order to conceive of a future that could sustain queer life through liberating potentialities. In these three texts, queerness is not conveyed as a reproductive identity in biological terms. However, forms of queer expression, particularly affectivities associated with radical queer negativity, are represented as creative, generative,

relational forces that are life-giving and necessary for survival in the midst of ongoing states of emergency.

The authors' representations of spatial temporality in all three memoirs can be understood through Sedgwick's notion of "a reparative position" towards the future. I conceive of this "position" in terms of a pivoting queer subject who considers the past in relation to what is still to come (Sedgwick 2003: 146). Sedgwick describes this orientation as an openness to surprise, in an oppositional stance to paranoia (2003: 146). This reparative impulse, in Sedgwick's conceptualization, includes a kind of hope, traumatic in its possibilities, for what the future holds. In their memoirs, Myles, Delany, and Wojnarowicz convey this reparative position. They approach the future openly with a critical understanding of queer spaces in the past and present. They are also driven by a hopeful desire to recover queer counterpublic experiences from the past in order to rediscover them in the present and future.

The impulse to leave the unbearable present in order to engage the potential of a liberated queer future is in part what drives the narratives in the three memoirs by Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles. This break in space and time, in order to discover a reparative future, is similar to the site of productive breakage that Santner theorizes as an aspect of a creaturely life. He refers to it as "an uncanny loci of alterity," where "the struggle for new meaning...is at its most intense" (Santner 2006: xv). It is also a site where Benjamin suggests hope can occur (Santner 2006: xv). In documenting their memoirs of queer spaces as sites of counterpublic experience, Myles, Delany, and Wojnarowicz are enacting forms of critical hope. They present expressive modes and narratives of queer history in their texts that they insist are significant for the queer present and future. The simultaneity of spatial temporality in the memoirs' representations of queer space can also be understood to be the articulation of "the struggle for new meaning," as a

central activity of creaturely life. The hope for new meaning in both the past and future of the memoirs is a reparative gesture that traverses this literary archive of queer spaces.

In the memoirs, the reparative state of spatial temporality is made possible through the perspectives and expressions of radical queer negativity. Though the concept of the reparative, “to repair” or “to make amends,” seems contradictory to radical negativity and the idea of queer failure, I want to consider that for the literary archive of queer space I am studying, situated in New York City in the last quarter of the 20th century, the gaze of radical queer negativity reveals that a critical comprehension of the future must include a reparative potential. In the midst of the states of emergency produced by the AIDS epidemic and processes of gentrification, the reparative potential is both imminent and necessary for survival and for activism. Sedgwick explains that, “Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters and creates” (2003: 146). I argue that it is these “fragments and part-objects” which become the materials of radical queer negativity.

Sedgwick asserts the notion that “symptoms of fluttering hope are rather like those of posttraumatic stress disorder, with the difference that the apparently absent cause of perturbation lies in the future, rather than in the past” (2003: 151 n.4). Sedgwick also claims that this reparative position, seemingly oriented towards the future, ushers in revelations about the past (2003: 146). This is the process that occurs in each of the memoirs. The three authors pivot, in their expressions of radical negativity, between what they have lived through and experienced, and what is still to come after their narratives have been written. For Myles, this pivot point is represented as the decision to leave a party of friends at the end of the novel. To take leave represents her awareness of the end of an era that she was part of in New York where she

became herself as a queer poet. From this ending, she envisions possibilities for a queer counterpublic future by looking back. For Delany, the pivot point is witnessing the loss of the porn cinemas in Times Square where he became himself as a queer adult. From this loss, he envisions the potential for a similar queer space that is informed by the counterpublic experiences he has documented from his memories. For Wojnarowicz, the pivot point is the recognition that he is dying of AIDS because of homophobia and government neglect. It is more difficult for Wojnarowicz to envision a future out of this context, but he does so by assembling his memoir and seeing it published a year before his death

The narrative perspectives in the memoirs that are used to imagine a reparative future are also expressive of radical queer negativity. These perspectives are concerned with the hostile and inhospitable present, and the need to remember and to create queer spaces of liberation. A reparative impulse in this context is oriented towards what is to come, performing queerness to witness the past and to conceive of liberating queer futures. As Muñoz writes, “Queerness is also a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (2009: 1).

In her memoir, Myles’s archive of memories of queer space demonstrates this reparative impulse. As Nelson notes of Myles’s poetry and earlier memoirs, “Reclamation is a recurrent and far-reaching gesture in Myles’s work (2007: 204). The final representation of a queer space in *Inferno* is a social one, situated at a party. Myles’s memory in this scene is of a queer relational existence that emphasizes a friendship between herself and a gay man—the kind of chosen family queers often form in a hostile world:

Did I get out of it now? Am I done? Tom and I used to always go to parties together in the 70s. We even lived together for a while in my apartment and once in my absence he

stretched out all my clothes, my grey beret, doing me. He said he was doing ‘Eileen’ drag...We had an agreement then to always go to parties together. Both being queer (and lonely) and usually impossibly in love....So we were kind of companions, consummate dates....However there was always a point in the night when he’d say I’ve got to go, Ei. (Myles 2010: 270-271)

As Myles ends her memoir, she confides to the reader, “Over the years I discovered it was always good to go....I think a poem is like a party. Because it has to end. You’ve got to leave, eventually. Tom knew” (2010: 271). Here at the end of her *Inferno*, on the last page, Myles is using the narrative structure to reflect the life she is representing. When she goes, the story ends, though the archive remains. She is concluding her memoir by leaving the party with her friend Tom. But to leave does not mean to end the narrative of her life or to lose the memories of the queer spaces she witnessed and inhabited. In the context of the archive, it is the beginning of a recovery. She concludes, “The thing is, when you’re writing a poem, no matter what you meant to say or do, when the leaving impulse comes, just finish your line and get the hell out of the room” (Myles 2010: 271). But just as the reader is urged to accept the narrative’s ending, Myles adds the reparative possibility: “Though, sometimes, even if you said too much, you can *still* go back and fix it. You can actually learn to have grace. And that’s heaven” (2010: 271). The reparative possibility here is manifested through a return, a going back, and it is contingent on being able to “learn” how to “fix” the excess of the narrative which is the “too much” that has been “said” (Myles 2010: 271).

In an interview Myles points out the reparative nature of her writing, as well as the possibilities for escape and encounter, in the queer spaces she has created:

I feel like my work is coming out of a loss of home, and a desire to replace that feeling with a body of work. I mean, I literally feel that when I’m not writing, I’m not home. And what the work is creating is a home. The work is making a space. Imagination is the engine of home. Fantasy was kind of like my first drug. Construing other worlds as a way to escape this one. Or to create a little respite or utopia within this one. To have them live next to each other would be what I’m trying to do now. (Personal Interview 2012)

This potential that Myles notes in her work, “to create a little respite or utopia” side by side with the world as she currently experiences it, represents a form of queer space and a reparative impulse that is refracted through the spatial temporality of her memoir.

At the end of his memoir, Wojnarowicz writes about his sense of needing to reject the here and now because it is not enough, and to consider the potential of a liberated future:

With all these occurrences of death facing me, I thought about issues of freedom. If government projects the idea that we, as people inhabiting this particular land mass, have freedom, then for the rest of our lives we will go out and find what appear to be the boundaries and smack against them like a heart against a rib cage. If we reveal boundaries in the course of our movements, then we will expose the inherent lie in the use of the word: freedom. (1991: 261)

Wojnarowicz speaks of the future in relation to the unbearable present. In his representation of spatial temporality, the present is the means by which to change the future. For Wojnarowicz, revealing the “boundaries” to freedom is critical work that is needed in order to resist those boundaries as the future approaches.

In his memoir, Delany gestures to the idea of a reparative future when he argues that it is worth returning to the coastline of the past, to make “a more historically concerned and concerted visit/invasion” (1999: xviii). While the representations of the queer spaces in his memoir are offered retrospectively, the fact that they did exist and served such a significant function, makes Delany conclude that there is a possibility they can exist again: “It is from those early impressions of what was visible along the coastline that others are most likely to decide whether or not they want to return and explore further” (Delany 1991: xviii). The metaphor of the coastline places Delany, as narrator, in the role of a traveling rambler or migrant figure, both experienced and world-weary, engaged in a search for another home. The text itself is then a record of his journey, though it is by no means linear. He acknowledges that he wants his project

to encourage “further investigation” of how to rediscover or rebuild the coastline, which is the key metaphor for the spatial temporality of memory in his text:

I hope these two extended essays function as early steps (though by no means are they the first) in thinking through the problem of where people, male and female, gay and straight, old and young, working class and middle class, Asian and Hispanic, black and other, rural and urban, tourist and indigene, transient and permanent, with their bodily, material, sexual, and emotional needs, might discover (and even work to set up) varied and welcoming harbors for landing on our richly variegated urban shore. (Delany 1991: xx)

In this passage, Delany also presents the metaphor of the temporal coastline as the literal shores of the island of Manhattan. For him it is a site that holds the potential of a welcoming home. His focus, in envisioning the island of Manhattan as a shelter and a space of potential belonging, emphasizes the “needs” of newcomers arriving in a city and considers what they might be longing for. Delany’s vision of this arrival and return suggests a transnational context and is characteristically inclusive and specific. It is part of his reparative impulse towards a liberated queer future.

Remembering Queer Counterpublic Histories to Understand the Present

Remember and reflecting on queer spaces as sites for counterpublic experience has become increasingly urgent in the contemporary moment. The queer present is “animated,” as Craig Jennex points out, “by a dwindling sense of agency in public discourse and an increasingly ‘progressive’ heteronormative LGBTQ political movement” (2014: n. pag.). Past and current forms of economic injustice and social isolation, produced by processes of gentrification, are intertwined with the dismantling of queer counterpublic spaces. For queers of color, this trauma is combined with the violence of racism, and for women it is combined with the violence of misogyny.

In order to begin to contend openly with these conditions in the present, and to alter their oppressive effects by transforming society through social movement, direct engagement in coalitional activist work is needed. By documenting queer counterpublic experiences in queer spaces, the memoirs offer ways to begin to imagine this social movement and express the reparative openness of hope. The texts also generate and sustain critical, creative gazes on the queer past and present, with the perception and understanding that queers are not yet free. They call attention to the ways in which histories of counterpublic experiences in queer spaces are being increasingly marginalized, repressed, and placed under erasure. By extension, their memoirs encourage a recognition of the disjunction and dissonance between the dominant, gentrified representations of contemporary queer life known as LGBTQ equality, and the actual, critical situations of queer people.

To think critically about these disjunctions, dissonances, and juxtapositions will allow for more diverse and expansive understandings of the queer present. As Muñoz writes, “The present is not enough. It is impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and “rational” expectations” (2009: 27). But Muñoz reminds us that we need to be attentive to the present even as we focus on queer spaces in the future: “Let me be clear that the idea is not simply to turn away from the present. One cannot afford such a maneuver, and if one thinks one can, one has resisted the present” (2009: 27). Instead, the present “must be known in relation to the alternative temporal and spatial maps provided by a perception of past and future affective worlds” (Muñoz 2009: 27).

In the contemporary moment of the “impoverished and toxic” present, which Muñoz argues we must be attentive to, the visibility of counterpublic queer histories and queer minoritarian experiences are still contentious. I argue that queers are not free when visible

representations of contemporary queer life do not address the intersectional oppressions queers face, and do not consider and recognize the counterpublic strengths of queer culture or queer communities formed in resistance to heteronormativity and other systems of oppression. In making this argument, I am also expressing a hope that draws upon Muñoz's articulation of "A structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*....Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing" (2009: 1). What the memoirs by Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles reveal is that queers are not yet free because many of the spaces which enable our freedom, whether as physical environments, relational practices, or queer imaginaries, have been dismantled or bought out through institutionalization and gentrification.

My project asserts that a study of these memoirs as queer counterpublic histories is crucial for reflecting on queerness in the present and future. Current representations of queerness are consistently being gentrified without resistance by queers themselves. In political and social terms, queers are allowed rights and privileges depending on how well we fit normative roles and behaviors, how we assimilate into heteronormative culture, and how we negotiate dominant structures of power. Interlocking systems of oppression shape how these rights and privileges are experienced and accessed by different queer people. Many of the mainstream queer advocacy groups in North America, focused on LGBTQ "rights" and "equality," demonstrate a lack of awareness and insight about the intersectional forms of injustice and discrimination for queers who deal with racism, misogyny, and economic precarity and exploitation. Mainstream queer organizations in the United States or Canada rarely step up to publically support the critical

activism and grassroots movements including Black Lives Matter, Idle No More, and No More Silence. Instead they align themselves with wealth and power in institutional systems, which also means accepting the ways that white supremacy, settler colonialism, patriarchy, and economic exploitation, maintain power and privilege for only a few in our society. As a result these queer advocacy groups do not represent most queer people.

Increasingly, within queer culture in the North America, those who experience privilege and power seem reluctant to recognize critical minoritarian perspectives. I suggest that some of this reluctance stems from a fear in contemporary queer culture about being queerer again—about becoming the queer who is called out, isolated, excluded, bashed, the unmentionable, the forgotten; the queer who is made to suffer and even to die. These traumatic aspects of queer existence continue to permeate our lives and the ways we approach the possibilities of queer freedom and visibility. Memories of queer counterpublic histories drawn from the last quarter of the 20th century, which include AIDS activism, direct action in the streets, taking care of each other outside of institutions, coalitional struggle, and prioritizing queer love, sex, and desire in the face of hostility and repression, get overwhelmed by fears of being excluded and attacked for who we are. Perhaps this is because we have lost access to counterpublic experiences generated in queer spaces. As Schulman has written, “In gay time, ‘recent’ quickly disappears because so many participants are dead, and others have been silenced. It’s hard to have collective memory when so many who were ‘there’ are not ‘here’ to say what happened” (2012: 135). In this context of fear, trauma, and lack of imagination, physical environments of queer space are disappearing and being dismantled; our relational practices are diminished; our queer imaginaries remain less than fully realized.

To experience some of the scraps and fragments of privilege that pass for freedom in our contemporary culture, queers are required to give up counterpublic space, assimilate into heteronormative frameworks, and engage with gentrified values and culture in order to be included and treated as human. Despite economic impoverishment, there is pressure to engage in this assimilation as consumers or risk being excluded. Hennessy outlines the key problems with queer assimilation in terms of class: “Redressing gay invisibility by promoting images of a seamlessly middleclass gay consumer or by inviting us to see queer identities only in terms of style, textuality, or performative play helps produce imaginary gay/queer subjects that keep invisible the divisions of wealth and labor that these images and knowledges depend on. The commodified perspectives blot from view lesbians, gays, and queers who are manual workers, sex workers, unemployed, and imprisoned” (2000: 140-141). Queers who do not have the choice of assimilation and of being accepted because of their ability to consume and to demonstrate privilege and power, are left more vulnerable and exposed to interlocking forms of oppression including homophobia and transphobia.

Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles express memories of the recent queer past in anti-assimilationist ways that are often oppositional to heteronormative culture. To read these memoirs is to think about queer assimilation in the present, and ways in which current queer movements contend with heteronormativity. The texts also encourage questions of where contemporary queer counterpublic expressions are located now, how they are being produced, and how they are different from earlier forms found in the memoirs.

I argue that these forms of contemporary counterpublic resistance can still be found in current grass-roots activism, outside of mainstream queer politics, that is intersectional in its organization and its political messages. As Jennex argues, in the contemporary moment, “A

number of groups are actively working against the cleaving of race and sexuality, especially around queer, trans, and feminist issues....the increasingly used #blacklivesmatter hashtag was started by three queer women of color—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi...to ‘affirm the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum’” (2014: n. pag.). These activist movements that bring experiences of racialized identity, sexuality, culture, gender, migration, and class together, offer radically inclusive frameworks that addresses relational differences, coalitional politics, as well as the shared and different experiences that exist between queer people.

I argue that the memoirs by Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles, are relevant for understanding queer spatial practices and constructs in the 21st century. As a literary archive of queer spaces that are understood and represented as sites of counterpublic histories, the three texts demonstrate the creative and political urgency of considering the dimensions and contended terms of queer spaces in the present. The memoirs also trigger reflections about what has happened in the contemporary moment to the different forms of freedom and visibility that queers scavenged and fought for in the recent past. My dissertation on the memoirs by Wojnarowicz, Delany, and Myles provides an innovative means of reflecting on the existence, the loss, and liberating potential of the queer spaces that the three writers witnessed and contributed to as participants and creators.

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