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**Foucault's Asceticism and the Subject of AIDS**

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**Foucault's Asceticism and the Subject of AIDS**

by

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## **Foucault's Asceticism and the Subject of AIDS**

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Although Foucault elaborated upon the socio-political possibilities he associated with a "homosexual ascesis" in several other interviews and writings, his death from AIDS in 1984 kept him from continuing to speak about this his final project. My dissertation, *Foucault's Asceticism and the Subject of AIDS*, will argue for the contemporary significance of Foucault's call for a "homosexual ascesis" by placing Foucault's last work on the genealogy of asceticism into direct dialogue with three of his intellectual and artistic peers: Derek Jarman, Herve Guibert and David Wojnarowicz. Like Foucault, all three men died of AIDS; unlike him, they left us a prolific literary and visual documentation of their experience with the disease. Drawing upon Foucault's historical-theoretical discussions of asceticism to identify interpretive topoi for reading these AIDS self-writings, my goal in this dissertation is twofold: 1) to reveal the specificity of Foucault's transvaluation of asceticism and in doing so, to contribute to the work of current scholars who seek to refine and extend our grasp of Foucault's late theories of subjectivity; and 2) to argue for the important place Foucault's "asceticism" must have within our ongoing attempts at understanding how AIDS has impacted the formation of homosexual subjectivities and cultures.

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## Introduction: Foucault's Asceticism and the Subject of AIDS

"the saint empowers others to become different from what they now are" (Wyschograd 56).

In 1991, three years before his death from AIDS at 52, the British activist, writer and film-maker Derek Jarman was canonized "St. Derek of Dungeness" in his garden by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a troupe of drag queens who dress in nun's habits and are perhaps best known for their favorite vehicle of transport through Gay Pride parades: roller skates. In reference to his newly acquired status, Jarman subtitled the last volume of his diaries, "A Saint's Testament." In the volume's main title, *At Your Own Risk*, Jarman alludes to his long publicly shared status as an HIV-positive man, and, subsequently, a PWA (person with AIDS). Living out the last years of his life often alone and isolated in his cottage in Dungeness on the southern coast of England, it indeed appeared as if Derek Jarman had chosen to live a saint's life—the life of an ascetic.

Just a decade before Jarman's ascetic performance, Michel Foucault, Jarman's peer as public intellectual cum activist/celebrity, spoke of the possibility of a "homosexual ascesis" in a 1981 interview with the popular French gay weekly *Le Gai Pied*, declaring that the fact that "[w]e've rid ourselves of asceticism" may well "be

our problem today":<sup>1</sup>

Asceticism as the renunciation of pleasure has bad connotations. But ascesis is something else: it's the work that one performs on oneself in order to transform the self or make the self appear which, happily, one never attains. Can that be our problem today? We've rid ourselves of asceticism. *Yet it's up to us to advance into a homosexual ascesis that would make us work on ourselves and invent--I do not say discover--a manner of being that is still improbable.* (Rabinow 137, emphasis added)

In this interview, Foucault argued that "it's up to us to advance into a homosexual ascesis" in direct response to his interlocutor, who had asked Foucault to clarify something he had been "saying a little while ago": "*Rather than crying about faded pleasures, I'm interested in what we ourselves can do*" (137 emphasis added).

By opposing the passive, "crying about faded pleasures," with action or praxis, i.e., "what we ourselves can do," Foucault strangely presages both the swath that AIDS would cut through the gay socio-cultural landscape and the proactive stance gays would take to face the epidemic. Yet Foucault was not, in 1981,

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1 In his philosophical exegesis of Michel Foucault's work, *Foucault*, Gilles Deleuze summarizes the essential role that Foucault's interviews play within a proper understanding of his entire corpus: "they extend the historical problematization of each of his books into the construction of the present problem" (115).

speaking directly to the AIDS epidemic, which hadn't quite been identified as such. Most crucially, Foucault was not excoriating queer pleasures, whether "faded" or lost. Rather, he insisted that it was precisely through exercising a "homosexual ascesis" that we would "make ourselves infinitely more susceptible to pleasure [plaisirs]" (137).<sup>2</sup>

Bringing into play the complexly imbricated sites of pleasure and praxis--topoi that remain among the most heatedly engaged in the queer community's continued confrontation with AIDS--Foucault's call for a "homosexual ascesis" appears extraordinarily prescient today.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Foucault's argument for understanding Western asceticism as precisely a theory, form and practice of social ethics, within whose historical

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2 When I use the terms "homosexual" and "gay" in this dissertation, I am following Foucault's (and others') use of the two terms, which can be roughly understood as follows: "homosexual" indicates both a specific historical moment in gay history (roughly from the Victorian period to the Stonewall rebellion in 1969), and an attempt, at times, of utilizing a more neutral signifier for "gay." Queer, a term which Foucault did not use, is a more recent invention and corrective to the gendered bias of the other terms, which, unfortunately, but, honestly, this Foucauldian project's essential though by no means exclusive focus on Western gay white male subjectivity largely reproduces. On the evolution of "homosexual" to "gay," see Jeffrey Escoffier, "Sexual Revolution and the Politics of Gay Identity," *Socialist Review* 15, July-October 1985. On "queer," see Lisa Duggan, "Making It Perfectly Queer," *Socialist Review* 22, (1992); and Michael Warner, ed. *Fear of a Queer Planet*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1993.

3 In the face of rising rates of HIV infection amongst gay men in America's urban centers, the question of gay sexual pleasure continues to be debated both within and without the gay community, with particular focus placed on the efficacy of strategies of safer sex education. See Lawrence K. Altman, "Many Gay Men in U.S. Unaware They Have H.I.V., Study Finds" *The New York Times*, July 8, 2002; Richard, Elovitch, "Beyond Condoms: How to Create a Gay Men's Culture of Sexual Health" *POZ*, June 1999; and David Tuller, "New Tactic to Prevent AIDS Spread," *The New York Times*, August 13, 2002.

trajectory sexuality has played a key (though by no means solitary) role, can no doubt assist us in better understanding and addressing the stalemate currently reached by some of the most vocal leaders of the gay community concerning the impact that AIDS has had on our individual and collective formations.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, because these current debates turn on an inability to agree upon the nature of gay sexual pleasure, and whether or not, and/or how we should be monitoring our appetites for such sexual pleasures in order to properly construct an *ethical* gay culture, they find a perfect analogy in Foucault's historical study, *The Use of Pleasure*, which reveals that quite similar, though certainly non-identical debates were held within the classical world.

And not surprisingly, during the period in which he presented this work, the much anticipated second volume of his *History of Sexuality*, to his public, Foucault *did* remark upon the usefulness of examining such parallels between historical and contemporary moments in the history of sexuality, specifically commenting upon the necessity of tracking contemporary questions about sexual ethics beyond or around the seemingly impenetrable

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<sup>4</sup> For an account of the debates over gay sexual ethics used to underwrite conflicting gay sociopolitical strategies that have been fought throughout the 1990's and into the present time between "sex positive" queer activists and their more socially conservative, "assimilationist" gay foes, see Caleb Crain's article "Pleasure Principles: Queer Theorists and Gay Journalists Wrestle Over the Politics of Sex." in the October 1997 issue of *Lingua Franca*. See also Douglas Crimp's succinct review of and response to these



edifice of a naturalized Judeo-Christian ethical tradition we moderns had inherited, and summarily declared ourselves liberated from (if only in the more heady moments of sexual liberation), and yet, according to him, had left crucially and unsatisfactorily unexamined. It was, Foucault made clear, the necessity of more closely examining the evolution of this tradition that led him to conduct more detailed historical and archival investigations into its genealogy. In the introduction to *The Use of Pleasure* he articulates the results of his findings in a new framework for viewing ethics; ultimately, these findings led him to formulate his call for a contemporary "homosexual ascesis."<sup>5</sup>

Foucault elaborated upon what he meant by a "homosexual ascesis," discussing the socio-political possibilities he associated with its potential in a number of interviews he gave to gay and lesbian popular magazines, including *The Advocate* and *Christopher Street*; however, his death from AIDS kept him from continuing to speak to his peers about this particular aspect of his larger, ongoing project to document the history of sexuality.

Over two decades have passed since the epidemic that cut off his important life and work was first

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arguments in the opening and closing chapters of *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> See Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of a Work in Progress." *The Foucault Reader*, ed. by Paul Rabinow. NY: Pantheon, 1984.

identified, and yet despite numerous medical advances in the effectiveness (if not widespread availability) of treatments for AIDS, the epidemic has not ended--for gay men, or for anyone else.<sup>6</sup> As a group that has had a long and distinctly severe (though by no means solitary) history of experience with this disease, we gay men find ourselves *still* struggling to comprehend the impact that AIDS has had, and continues to have, on the shapes and paths our individual and collective lives have taken. Although the struggle to comprehend the impact of AIDS is tiresome, it constitutes one of our most powerful means of surviving the disease.

For this reason, I believe that seeing Foucault's vision through, or, rather, *seeing through* Foucault's vision, by continuing to articulate, extend and thus discover his belief in the possibility of a homosexual ascesis, remains even more relevant today than ever.

Let me explain.

The idea for this dissertation project initially emerged from my fascination with Foucault's rather oblique exhortation that it is "up to us to advance into a homosexual ascesis."<sup>7</sup> To more fully understand his

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<sup>6</sup> On the provocative notion that gay men are currently in a period best described as "post-AIDS," see Andrew Sullivan's "When Plagues End: Notes on the Twilight of an Epidemic," *The New York Times Magazine*. November, 10, 1996. See also Douglas Crimp's response to Sullivan in *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*.

<sup>7</sup> I thank Dolora Wojciehowski for helping me see how Foucault's reticence at explaining exactly what he meant by the term "homosexual ascesis" led me to search for more

invitation, one that I felt so immediately and so deeply compelled to accept, I sought to explore the dialectic formed at the intersection of Foucault's asceticism and the disease that interrupted it. On the way I discovered that I was not alone. David Halperin and Michael Warner had already begun the formative work of illuminating the contemporary relevance of Foucault's call for a "homosexual ascesis" by revealing the specific contours of its vision for gay sexual politics in the three main areas he deemed most germane to individual and collective formations: ethics, aesthetics and politics.<sup>8</sup> Through careful elaboration, Halperin and Warner effectively proved that the continuing project of assessing the impact that AIDS has had on the formation of our queer cultures and subjectivities cannot proceed without taking Foucault's last work on asceticism (or what he defined as "the means by which we can change ourselves") into careful account.

By situating Foucault's insistence that gay men create a "homosexual ascesis" within the context of current sociopolitical debates existing both within and without the gay community about AIDS and its impact on gay sexual politics, Warner and Halperin successfully

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practical, embodied narratives of queer ascetic experience in an attempt to fill the space that his cryptic comments left vacant.

<sup>8</sup> See David Halperin's *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, NY: OUP Press, 1995 and Michael Warner's *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, Minneapolis: U

revived Foucault's call for us, his homosexual peers to immerse ourselves in the process of "critical ontology," or an analysis of the "conditions of possibility" for the emergence of our contemporary queer selves.<sup>9</sup> In assisting us to make this connection alone, Warner and Halperin's work has done much to alter the often debilitating sense many of us feel when observing the current ideological rifts that divide the gay community today.<sup>10</sup> From a Foucauldian perspective, however, such debates, as tiresome as they can be in their tendency to block any true intellectual movement beyond a reductive taking of sides, can actually be seen as an *essential* part of how we come to redefine who we are as homosexuals.<sup>11</sup>

As I continued with my own investigations into the idea of a contemporary homosexual ascesis, I became aware

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of Minn. Press, 1993 and *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*, Cambridge: Harvard U Press, 1999.

9 Foucault uses the phrase "critical ontology" in his key late essay "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. NY: Pantheon, 1984.

10 On the debates between notions of "queer" vs. "gay" identity, see Andrew Sullivan's *Virtually Normal: An Argument about Homosexuality*, NY: Knopf, 1995 and Michael Warner's *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*, Cambridge: Harvard U Press, 1999.

11 In describing the current landscape of gay public debate as having reached an unproductive standoff, I am not suggesting that we have ever enjoyed anything like a happy consensus. For a more detailed consideration of the origins of the gay and lesbian political movement in America, see John D'Emilio's *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1983. For a more recent perspective that succinctly describes the limitations of postmodern gay identity politics and suggests a "shift away from the preoccupation of self and representations characteristic of identity politics and poststructuralism to an analysis that embeds the self in institutional and cultural practices," see Steven Seidman's "Identity and Politics in a 'Postmodern' Gay Culture, *Fear of a Queer Planet*, ed. Michael Warner, ed. Minneapolis: U of Minn. Press, 1993.

that the task of reviving this late Foucauldian concept still demanded further attention. My dissertation seeks to do precisely this by presenting what I believe is important genealogical evidence that can help us elaborate upon and extend our understanding of Foucault's concept of a homosexual ascesis: the voices of a generation of gay men now *almost entirely lost* to us, a generation of men whose very lives co-created the radical gay community from which and through which Foucault learned, practiced and articulated his vision of queer asceticism.

What distinguishes the three men I have chosen as representative voices for this lost generation of gay men? Like Foucault, Derek Jarman, Herve Guibert and David Wojnarowicz all belonged to a very specific historical, cultural and sexual demographic, one that was amongst the very first and hardest hit by AIDS.<sup>12</sup> As French, British, and American citizens, all four of these men lived within Western capitalist nations that afforded them a transnational mobility mostly unavailable to citizens of less economically privileged and/or less socially liberal

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<sup>12</sup> The historical period that this dissertation's presentation of these men's voices represents can be roughly marked as beginning in 1981, during the intensification of Foucault's public discussion of his work on *The Use of Pleasure*. 1981 also marks the emergence of AIDS, what was then called "GRID," or "gay-related immune disorder. This project's period ends with the year of the last of the four men's deaths in 1994. All died from AIDS related illnesses. 1994 also roughly represents a turning point in the availability of effective treatment for AIDS, otherwise known as protease inhibitors, which when combined with other medications including anti-virals, provided a major breakthrough in AIDS treatment.

countries.<sup>13</sup> Despite their different ethnic, religious, national and class backgrounds, as white men inhabiting Western capitalist nations within the Atlantic corridor bordered by Western Europe on one side and North America on the other, they all shared a common Judeo-Christian, trans-Atlantic, anglo-european colonial heritage.<sup>14</sup> This heritage, a Western historical, cultural, and ideological apparatus, provided all four men with a particular, shared epistemological and ontological framework from within which they perceived, interpreted and expressed their experience.<sup>15</sup> Woven into this ideological apparatus is the Western humanism which offered all three men a kind of ontological privilege which undergirded their experience of subjectivity.<sup>16</sup> When confronted with AIDS,

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13 The transnational mobility gay men of this demographic and period enjoyed, shaped not only the cultural contours of their lives, but also the epidemiological conditions within which they lived. See Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On*, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1987. For a debate of Shilts' problematic narrativization of these conditions, see Simon Watney's *Practices of Freedom*. See also John Greyson's *Zero Patience*.

14 The work of Charles Taylor and Richard Rorty has provided me with an understanding of the epistemological and ontological foundations of the Western bourgeois humanist subject. See Taylor's *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* and Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*.

15 My understanding of the term "experience" follows directly from Foucault's concise definition of the term in the introduction to his second volume of *The History of Sexuality: The Use of Pleasure*. For a critical investigation into the epistemological, ontological and rhetorical role that the term "experience" has played within identity politics, see the following sources: Elizabeth J. Bellamy and Artemis Leontis, "A Genealogy of Experience: From Epistemology to Politics." *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 6, # 1, 1993; Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience." *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. by Abelove, Barale and Halperin. NY: Routledge, 1993; and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience." *Copyright*. 1987.

16 See Tony Davies, *Humanism*. London: Routledge, 1997.

however, each would undergo an ontological paradigm shift, fashioning new strategies of aesthetic self-formation. In doing so, each man *embodied* the practice of deontology that Foucault had associated with asceticism.

This dissertation approaches these men's voices in the prolific number of texts they created during the short window of time that began when they first became aware that they were HIV positive, and ended when they died from AIDS. When read together, these texts provide us with an immensely detailed material documentation of the "practices of self" that Foucault had introduced in his theory of asceticism.<sup>17</sup> Mining Foucault's historical-theoretical discussions of asceticism for interpretive topoi to use in interpreting these texts, I hope to achieve three objectives: 1) to reveal the specificity of Foucault's transvaluation of asceticism, and, in doing so, to help us refine and extend our grasp of Foucault's late theories of subjectivity; 2) to argue for the important place Foucault's "asceticism" must have within

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<sup>17</sup> Other scholars have begun the process of critiquing Jarman, Guibert and Wojnarowicz' work on an individual basis. For these sources, consult the chapters that follow. However, no one has brought them together. It is my contention that they form an obvious trio of representative voices because there is simply no other gay male intellectual of their generation, cut down by AIDS, who produced an equal number of autobiographical texts in such an experimental and diverse array of genre and media. Indeed, to my mind, no other gay male artist of their generation has left behind such a public, prolific and diverse corpus as these men have. Moreover, all three men created art in visual, literary and performative formats. As such, they consistently defy individual categorization: they are not simply "writers," "filmmakers" or "photographers." Although it is essential to add Marlon Riggs to this list, his literary output outside his films was not as substantial.

our ongoing attempts at understanding how AIDS has impacted the formation of queer subjectivities and cultures; and finally, 3) to suggest that Foucault's asceticism might be a useful apparatus for framing contemporary queer socio-political concerns.

#### Asceticism and AIDS: "Dangerous Bedfellows"?

Returning to Foucault's assertion that "our problem today" may well be that "[w]e've rid ourselves of asceticism" probably strikes many of us as a puzzling, indeed, counterintuitive claim. What place, if any, does asceticism have within our contemporary notion of identity politics? Doesn't ridding ourselves of asceticism mean we've freed ourselves from the chains of an outdated religious orthodoxy, that nevertheless keeps cropping up in disturbing ways?<sup>18</sup> What was Foucault's investment in reviving and revaluing a term that has, in modernity, been more widely reviled as a politically regressive path of self-renunciation and denial?<sup>19</sup> The

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18 I'm thinking here of an extreme example: debates surrounding the phenomenon of suicide bombing. Is it a form of asceticism, a pathology, or both? In his introduction to *Asceticism*, the anthology that sprung from the watershed international conference on the topic held at Union Theological Seminary in April, 1993, Richard Wimbush confirms the need to challenge "modernity's 'secular' intellectual and popular understandings of, and prejudices against, the ascetic impulse as expressive of irrationality, traditionalism, or fanaticism of the religious life" (Wimbush xx).

19 For a brilliant elaboration of the deeply paradoxical role that asceticism has played within modernity, see Jiwei Ci, "Disenchantment, Desublimation, and Demoralization: Some Cultural Conjunctions of Capitalism. *New Literary History*, #30, 1999. See also Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, tr. Talcott Parsons (London



common stereotype of asceticism recalls a subject who strangely *chooses* to mortify himself/herself, suggesting, in the modern idiom of identity politics, an archaic type of subjectivity, which in its performance of self-mortification appears anathemic to a post-Enlightenment politics that has largely stressed identity *affirmation*.<sup>20</sup> For sure, our commonsense notion of asceticism most likely aligns itself neatly with an understanding of the circa *Discipline and Punish* Foucauldian subject, "traversed by power," molded and marked by Western disciplinary and discursive formations into a "docile body."<sup>21</sup> However, I will argue that Foucault's move to revive, redefine and recirculate a concept of asceticism within late modernity signaled his very desire to revise his earlier and subsequently all too dominant ideas about power's hold on the production and experience of subjectivity.

In this respect, my dissertation joins the work of current scholars who have attempted to reveal the radicality of Foucault's more overlooked late work on

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1930); Friedrich Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*, tr. Walter Kaufman. NY: Vintage, 1967; and Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, tr. James Strachey, NY, 1961.

20 See Kallistos Ware, "The Way of the Ascetic: Negative or Affirmative?" in *Asceticism*, ed. by Richard Valantasis and Richard Wimbush, NY: OUP, 1995.

21 Debates about the precise ramifications of Foucault's theory of subjectivity have, for example, caused feminists to air quite vocal disagreements over the usefulness of his theory in their critical and political endeavors. See Jana Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power, and the Body*. NY: Routledge, 1991; Caroline Ramazanoglu, ed. *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions between Foucault and Feminism*, NY: Routledge, 1993.

subjectivity.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, I contribute to the small but vocal handful of religious studies scholars who claim that it is specifically Foucault's work on religion that houses his more radical ideas on subjectivity.<sup>23</sup> In addition, the work of queer Medievalists has played an essential role in helping me understand how the ascetic practice all four of my authors undergo involves a specifically queer appropriation of history that functions not as an essentialism, whereby one would posit an identical or theological relationship between past and present, but rather as a disruptive, de-ontological act, wherein the projection of affective ties across non-contiguous periods strategically rejects the hegemony enjoyed by a positivist politics of identity.<sup>24</sup> Building bridges between these three groups, my project intends not only to underscore their common goal of narrating a "postidentitarian" politics, but also to assist my readers in envisioning how these politics can actually take shape within individual embodied practice, from and through which collective formations can potentially grow.

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22 See Elspeth Probyn's *Sexing the Self: Gendered Positions in Cultural Studies*. NY: Routledge, 1993, and Jon Simons, *Foucault and the Political*. NY: Routledge, 1995.

23 See work by James Bernauer and Arnold Davidson, discussed and cited in the next chapter, but for a good introduction to their positions, see their essays in the collection *The Final Foucault*, edited by Davidson. See Jeremy Carrette's *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality*. New York: Routledge, 2000 and also his *Political Spirituality and Religion and Culture: Michel Foucault*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

24 See Carolyn Dinshaw's *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*. Durham: Duke U Press, 1999 and also Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger, eds. *Queering the Middle Ages*. Minneapolis: U of Minn. Press, 2002.

I hope to reveal how the vast archive of historical texts of Western asceticism, by gesturing to an already well trodden path, provides us with documents that can potentially assist us in constructing contemporary ethical, aesthetic, and political strategies.

Towards a Contemporary Queer Asceticism: A Counterintuitive Claim?

When he called for a "homosexual asceticism," Foucault acknowledged that asceticism "as the renunciation of pleasure has bad connotations." When we place this concept into the context of AIDS, as my project suggests we should, these negative connotations quite arguably deepen. Defined broadly as renunciation, or "practicing strict self-denial," one can immediately point to the fact that asceticism has already been promoted as a response to AIDS; for example, arguments that gay men have only themselves to blame for not successfully halting the AIDS epidemic within their community, due to their childish refusal to abandon an unbalanced and unchecked sexual rapacity, have been forwarded in different guises by Larry Kramer, Andrew Sullivan, Michaelangelo Signorile, and Gabriel Rotello.<sup>25</sup> These polemics, however, have yet to find wide acceptance in the gay community because their attack on the gay

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<sup>25</sup> See Douglas Crimp's *Melancholia and Moralism*, and Michael Warner's *The Trouble with Normal*.

right to pursue sexual pleasure outside of heteronormative frameworks sounds, quite simply, too homophobic.<sup>26</sup>

The anthology *Policing Public Sex*, published by the New York City based activist collective Dangerous Bedfellows, as well as Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant's watershed article "Sex in Public" both attest to the central role that defending queers' rights to engage in radical forms of public sex has played in within the history of queer political activism. The likelihood that the idea of a homosexual asceticism might be embraced within these ranks seems, at first thought, slim; however, I hope to show how Foucault's very reconceptualization of asceticism--his notion of it as shorthand for an understanding of contemporary sexuality as a practice of freedom, indeed, as a technology of subjectivity whose exercise produces profound and inventive cultural ramifications vis a vis subjectivity, ethics, aesthetics--aligns itself quite comfortably with the goal of the queer public sex movement to abandon assimilationist models for queer cultural and self formations. Indeed, Foucault's notion that a "homosexual asceticism" could offer a "way out" of conventional narratives of homosexual identity provides queer public

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<sup>26</sup> Indeed, from the very beginning of the AIDS epidemic, gay men have defended their right to reject the heteronormative logic that would insist upon sexual abstinence as the most effective measure of preventing AIDS. See Douglas Crimp, ed. *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*. Boston: MIT Press, 1988.

sex activists with a succinct theoretical articulation of their political strategy.

Indeed, the emphasis that these activists have placed on the notion of queer "world making" finds amazing parallel in similar claims historians have made on behalf of asceticism.<sup>27</sup> For example, in one of 42 essays collected into the anthology that sprang from the conference at Union Theological Seminary, *Asceticism*, editor Richard Valantasis reviews the work of "the three primary ascetical theorists of this century"--Max Weber, Michel Foucault, and Geoffrey Harpham--to formulate what he calls "A Theory of the Social Function of Asceticism" (544). Through this synthesis, Valantasis presents us with the following basic definition:

At the center of ascetical activity is a self who, through behavioral changes, seeks to become a different person, a new self; to become a different person in new relationships; and to become a different person in a new society that forms a new culture. As this new self emerges (in relationship to itself, to others, to society, to the world) it masters the behaviors that enable it at once to deconstruct the old self and construct the new. Asceticism, then, constructs both the old and the reformed self and the cultures in which these selves

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<sup>27</sup> On the concept of queer "world making" see Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman, "Queer Nationality" in *Fear of a Queer Planet*, ed. Michael Warner.

function: asceticism asserts the subject of behavioral change and transformation, while constructing and reconstructing the environment in which that subjectivity functions. (547)

Valantasis makes pretty heroic claims here for world-making role of asceticism. But most clearly, he insists that "ascetic performance finds its fullest expression in the articulation and construction of a new subjectivity" (549). Queer activists interested in further understanding the material processes of "world-making" could find these claims potentially interesting.

However broad Valantasis' claims for asceticism may seem, they are fueled by a desire to overturn dominant cultural stereotypes of ascetic phenomena (think Medieval Christians flagellating themselves while muttering "*mea culpa*"), to transform the perceived negative trajectory of ascetic practices into a specifically *productive* trajectory. Yet shedding the ascetic tradition of some of its excess ideological baggage poses a challenging task. However, because asceticism offers us compelling historical evidence of precisely how embodied practice can produce new subjectivities and their concomitant new cultures, this task remains an important one to take on.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, asceticism's particular, historically analyzable

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28 For a vivid illustration of this point, see Carolyn Walker Bynum's *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, NY: Zone Books, 1991 and *Holy Feast, Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987.

relation to the emergence of a host of contestatory subjectivities demands that we attempt to map similar instances within contemporary cultures.<sup>29</sup>

My Own Queer Ascesis: the Personal and Political Origins of this Project

My interest in this project stems from my experience working within both AIDS activist politics and community service. From serving as a phone counselor for an AIDS crisis line and as a caregiver for several men with AIDS, to attending demonstrations with ACT-UP throughout the late eighties, my personal experience with AIDS has guided my academic study of its social and ideological impact on homosexual subjectivity. Although the gay community is no longer foremost amongst the populations at risk for AIDS on a global level, I firmly believe that the lessons learned from our early experience of this disease can be of important use for a wide audience today.

My interest in and experience with AIDS as a gay man is not the only autobiographical aspect underlying this project. I have been similarly concerned with asceticism since my youth, starting when my mother left my family to find God and herself in 1973. Divesting herself of her

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<sup>29</sup> Feminist scholars have excelled in this endeavor, see Edith Wyschograd's *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* and Margaret Miles, *Fullness of Life: Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism*, and *The Good Body: Asceticism in Contemporary Culture*.

material possessions and many of my own, my mother took a vow of poverty and lived for many years in South and Central America. She understood her path as precisely an ascetic one--indeed, this was the only path to spiritual fulfillment she found available to her at that time. To represent this negative trajectory, characterized by St. John of the Cross as a "journey into the dark night of the soul," my mother changed her name from Suzanne Humphrey Ayres to Suzanne Nothing.

At the point of her deepest crisis, which she of course understood as a deeply desired, intensive self-transformation, she wrote a letter to me describing how she had been picked up by aliens at the top of a mountain in Vilcabamba, Ecuador. "I am not your mother," she wrote, telling me that the woman I knew had been taken away.

I remember staring for hours at the passport-sized photograph of herself she had sent me with this letter, and the intense, somewhat ethereal cast of her gaze. Although I did not choose or need to judge her in any way at that time, I was unable to understand why she felt so compelled to strip away her identity in order to create a new one. What I didn't know then was how deeply influential my mother's valuation of a negative ontology would one day become for me. At that time, however, I did not wholly understand this negative path of subjectivity deformation and subsequent reformation--but then, I was



simply a young boy learning how it felt to grow into an identity for which there was, at that time, ironically, no positive social affirmation. How could I understand her need to efface herself, her mother/woman/wife identity (that I had known and loved), when I was struggling to construct, to find, yes, to affirm an identity as a gay boy, though lacking the words and materials to form such a positive queer self?

In my mid teens, I started looking for these materials. And luckily, I found them in the public library, in the words disseminated by post-Stonewall era gay and lesbian liberation activists.<sup>30</sup> But then something happened during the year I began to think seriously about walking that daunting, though now visible, path toward coming out: AIDS appeared. At that time, in 1981, it was first called "gay cancer," and then "GRID," or "Gay related immune disorder." Voraciously if secretly in search of my nascent self, I read the gay periodical *The New York Native*, which was the first to warn gay men of the disease's appearance. In those early days it was clear that the politics of liberation, that had up until then taken a very celebratory shape, had suffered a fatal blow, and would never be exactly the same again.

The brief promise held out to me by the gay liberationist slogan "gay is good" was suddenly submerged in the homophobic hysteria that accompanied the

appearance of AIDS. Indeed, the early acronym for AIDS, "GRID," very effectively collapsed socially perceived boundaries between this new, deadly disease and a still largely stigmatized gay male identity. I understood this with absolute clarity during the summer of 1982 when I was coming out. I was working a job on break from college, and one of my co-workers had anonymously scrawled the phrase "GAY: got AIDS yet?" on my lunch bag.

This moment signaled my introduction to the vicious combination of homophobia and fear that characterized the "AIDS panic" years of America in the nineteen eighties. My newly affirmed identity automatically implicated me in a deadly epidemic. When I found an identity that affirmed my desire to have sex with men, I discovered myself perched at the edge of an abyss that yawned deeper with every sexual encounter, no matter how tentative, protected, or later, following emerging guidelines, safe. More than once, looking in the mirror after sex with a man, this newfound pleasure, I would contemplate the possibility that death had entered my body through the vectors of intimacy: touch, orgasm, fluid. At nineteen, I felt old as I mouthed the words to myself, "I am going to die," on numerous occasions; I was certain that I would not escape the rising mortality of the epidemic. The whole notion of a "positive" gay male identity was subsumed by fears of seroconversion. "Negative" and

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30 I remember, in particular, the collection of coming out narratives, *Word is Out*.

"positive" no longer simply described one's attitude or approach to gay identity, they were now markers delineating the border between life and death.

Despite the dark social climate of AIDS in the Reagan years, I did not remain in an unmitigated state of fright. At Wesleyan I found a haven where the tentacles of AIDS seemed never quite fully to reach; I discovered a very strong, politically active gay and lesbian community there. I found men to guide me who, older than me by only one to two years, seemed, in their maturity, eons away. Many of them subsequently died.

After graduation in 1987, I moved to New York City and entered an established urban gay and lesbian community scrambling to face the growing epidemic. Their incredible determination fueled the formation of many new social and political organizations, including ACT-UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. By 1987 AIDS had irrevocably altered the gay community. In response, we became AIDS activists and soon dubbed ourselves queers. We took to the streets wielding banners that declared "silence = death," a slogan that interrogated the contours of negative ontology and sponsored an ascesis of queer AIDS activism.<sup>31</sup> In combat boots and jeans, we queers were self-styled warriors, a fierce, loving

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31 See Lee Edelman's essay "Subjectivity and the Tank" for a brilliant critique of ACT-UP's rhetoric and aesthetic of AIDS activism.

collective united in our aesthetic and ethical stance against AIDS.

By 1995, the landscape of the epidemic, which had heretofore resembled a bloody battleground for queers, was undergoing a sea change. ACT-UP had fought and won eight years of significant battles for people with HIV and AIDS. Then the first protease inhibitors appeared in the United States. The emergence of the first effective treatment for AIDS coincided with Bill Clinton's presidency, which signaled a departure from the antagonistic AIDS politics of the Reagan and Bush administrations. Thousands of lives had been lost, but miraculously, suddenly, it looked as though lives were being saved. Effective treatments brought an unimaginable reprieve; a new era was ushered in and as AIDS transformed, so did the queer community.<sup>32</sup>

As I write this introduction, in June of 2003, we are now over twenty years into the epidemic. In a May 2002 review of AIDS activist and theorist Douglas Crimp's recently published collection of essays on AIDS, *Melancholia and Moralism*, Simon Watney, who, along with Crimp and a handful of others, articulated the first activist response to AIDS at the beginning of the epidemic, reflects upon a bygone ACT-UP era, a time that is "already ancient history to at least two generations of younger lesbians and gay men who have come out since

the early-'90s heyday" of AIDS activist politics (43).

Watney states that while "Crimp often seems to mourn the passing of classic AIDS activism," he does not; instead, he argues, "the disappearance of large-scale AIDS activism may be a sign not of activism's failure but of its success" (44). Watney states:

AIDS activism succeeded because it focused on clear aims that have largely been achieved. These included the release of previously unavailable treatment drugs, the involvement of people with HIV in the design of clinical trials for potential treatments, and the contesting of the moralism that held back targeted education work. Confrontational activism is simply not the most appropriate way to achieve current goals, though this is not to say that it may not be necessary again in the future.<sup>33</sup>

In accounting for the current "shift in gay politics," Watney does admit that the passing of the AIDS activist moment has signaled the "parallel loss of a strong sense of collectivity among people with HIV," yet also he heralds the birth of "new collective [sexual] identities" that have been heretofore unimaginable in their sheer diversity and scope. Though Watney is correct

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32 See Schulman, Sarah, *My American History*. NY: Routledge, 1994.

33 Here Watney makes clear our responsibility, as citizens of Western capitalist nations, to not lose sight of the globally shifting battleground of the current fight for access to effective treatments for AIDS. See "And the Band Played On: Simon Watney on Douglas Crimp." *Art Forum*: May 2002 (43-44).

in his claim that the fragmentation of gay politics represents a host of "conflicting goals" for gays and lesbians today, his insistence that such fragmentation also sees the emergence of newly appearing collective queer sexual identities, which must be accounted for (and not overlooked because they fail to match the traditional AIDS activist paradigm), conveys a pragmatic optimism for the present and future of queer politics, an optimism that is noticeably absent in the essays that frame Crimp's newest work. I call attention to their differences in tone, not so subtle, yet perhaps of not much compelling rhetorical importance either, because both men confess, in the midst of surveying the current gay zeitgeist, that they are also contending with the complicated affective task of coming to terms with a recent HIV infection.<sup>34</sup> Each man thus admits the complex task of mourning the passing of a particular condition of gay collective *and* individual (or self) formation, whilst actually undergoing the ongoing processes involved with this change as well. Here is a vivid illustration of how our individual and collective gay lives are so deeply implicated within AIDS. Here, also, is a vivid illustration of my own personal stakes in the work and

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34 Of the affective state that characterized the period of his exposure to HIV and subsequent infection, Crimp says: "feelings of loss pervaded my life. I felt overwhelming loss just walking the streets of New York, the city that since the late 1960s had given me my sense of being really alive." *Melancholia and Moralism* (15).

completion of the project represented by this dissertation.

#### The Politics of Queer Pleasures and Feelings

Just as Watney and Crimp do in the texts I cite above, a lot of gays, lesbians and queers are talking about the politics of our pleasures and feelings, but in very new ways that very much push at and question the rhetorical assumptions and epistemological foundations that form, and have formed, our notion of what constitutes identity, politics, political formations, political experience. My dissertation advisor, Ann Cvetkovich, leads the way here, when she asks that we "keep open the question of how affective experience gives rise to public culture."<sup>35</sup>

I quote Cvetkovich here, because what she articulates, I believe, provides a key to grasping the goals of this dissertation, which documents some powerful narratives of affective experience in the hope that these feelings won't be forgotten or lost. What lessons can these feelings teach us? What *kinds* of feelings are they? What pleasures and/or pains are made available through the performance of queer asceticism? Can these affects, occurring as they do and must, on individual bodies, possibly spawn collective movements? In the chapters that

follow, this dissertation tries to answer these questions as it documents and surveys some affective states that might be called queer and sacred. Our guides to this realm are the queer saints and mystics who, before they died of AIDS, wrote and spoke honestly of their experimental use of sex and drugs, men who sought to attain what Foucault called "limit experiences," experiences that push at the boundaries of conventional self-identity.

When Michel Foucault claimed that contemporary gays could make use of what he called a "homosexual ascesis," he did so to encourage the proliferation of precisely the kinds of heterogeneous collective sexual identities that themselves emerge from individual queer affective experiences. Most crucially, Foucault emphasized the ethical, world making implications of our public enactment of such affective experiences:

we have to understand that with our desires, through our desires, go new forms of relationships, new forms of love, new forms of creation. Sex is not a fatality: it's a possibility for creative life (Rabinow 163).

The lives lived by Herve Guibert, Derek Jarman and David Wojnarowicz embodied the "new forms of creation" to which Foucault refers here. In the chapters that follow I



will attempt to show how they did. In chapter one, I present and discuss Foucault's notion of asceticism as a framework for discerning the aesthetic and ethical implications of the creative and affective texts of AIDS experience that Guibert, Jarman and Wojnarowicz have left behind. In chapter two, I look at Herve Guibert's aesthetic self-fashioning as an ascetic strategy he invents to survive AIDS. His goal is to give his public a very "beautiful" performance of a disease he describes as "dazzling and sleek." In chapters three and four I look at Derek Jarman's asceticism as he embodies it in a variety of experimental forms and genres. Indeed, I will show how Jarman's asceticism represents a proliferation of diverse texts whose styles emerge from the private and public dimensions of his ascetic experience. In chapter five I describe David Wojnarowicz' art as an example of queer mysticism, the documentation of which calls into question traditional assumptions about the role of sex in ascetic practice. In my conclusion, I will discuss queer asceticism as an instance of how the ascetic tradition has evolved under the contemporary, postmodern conditions of late capitalism. I will survey examples of what I see as a current flowering of individual and collective cultural practices and performances of contemporary queer asceticism. In doing so I will manage to answer the

question that seems to be on everyone's mind: what exactly does a queer ascetic sex act look like?

## Chapter One: Foucault's Asceticism

"To be 'gay,' I think, is not to identify with the psychological traits and the visible masks of the homosexual but to try and develop a way of life."

--Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life" (Rabinow 138).

"according to Foucault's conception, 'the self' which is to be cultivated by means of 'an art of life' (whether in the ancient world or in the modern) is not a personal *identity* so much as it is a relation of reflexivity, a relation of the human subject to itself in its power and its freedom...Hence, to cultivate oneself...is not to explore or experience some given self, conceived of as a determinate private realm, a space of personal interiority, but instead to use one's relation to oneself as a potential resource with which to construct new modalities of subjective agency and new styles of personal life that may enable one to resist or even to escape one's social and psychological determinations."

--David Halperin, *Saint Foucault* (76).

We find Foucault's interest in asceticism emerge after the publication of Volume One of his *History of Sexuality*, when he began to speak of a shift in his perception and analysis of subjectivity's relation to power. In the introduction to volume two of his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault acknowledges the limitations of his past work which focused primarily on the discursive/disciplinary "fields of knowledge" that produced sexuality as a truth or science which was then regulated and supported through the "establishment of a set of rules and norms" carried out by "religious, juridical, pedagogical, and medical institutions" (2-4).

To remedy this imbalance, Foucault highlights a necessary third node in his study of the genealogy of modern subjectivity/sexuality: an analysis of "the forms within which individuals are able, are obliged, to recognize themselves as subjects of this sexuality" (4). Foucault explained this shift, and the role that his reappropriation of asceticism had in it, in an interview he gave at the time of Volume Two's release:

Up to that point I had conceived the problem of the relationship between the subject and games of truth in terms either of coercive practices—such as those of psychiatry and the prison system—or of theoretical or scientific games—such as the analysis of wealth, of language, and of living beings. In my lectures at the College de France, I tried to grasp it in terms of what may be called a practice of the self...*It is what one could call an ascetic practice, taking asceticism in a very general sense—in other words, not in the sense of a morality of renunciation but as an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain to a certain mode of being.*

(Rabinow 281-282 emphasis added)

While Foucault would not abandon his previous analysis of the formative role that the power/knowledge nexus has played in the production of Western sexuality, he nonetheless seeks to find within this paradigm what

his critics roundly said was not there: a sense of agency. I would argue that in choosing asceticism as an umbrella category to describe this possibility for agency, Foucault is able to articulate a more robust notion of the modern subject: one who is both subject to power/knowledge and yet, crucially, *enabled* by it. Certainly from our postmodern vantage, the idea of asceticism communicates such an ambivalent relation to power.

Foucault's understanding of asceticism marks a distinct shift in his conceptualization of the Western subject. As Foucault himself put it: "Perhaps I've insisted too much on the technology of domination and power. I am more and more interested in the interaction between oneself and others, and in the technologies of individual domination, in the mode of action that an individual exercises upon himself by means of the technologies of the self" (Rabinow 225).<sup>36</sup> Studying asceticism then becomes Foucault's mode of identifying and discussing precisely those "historically analyzable

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36 In an important talk/essay from 1981, "Sexuality and Solitude," Foucault recites his oft-repeated mantra: "I am not a structuralist," his common defense against the misrepresentation of his earlier work. Removing his theory of power from the context of his *soixante-huit* influences and reinserting it into the context of his current concerns, he then insists his concern for the subject was his priority all along: "I have tried to get out from the philosophy of the subject, through a genealogy of the modern subject as a historical and cultural reality—which means as something that can eventually change. That, of course, is politically important" (Rabinow 176).

practices" through which subjects have sought to transform themselves.

Foucault uses the term *ascesis* broadly then, to indicate "the work that one performs on oneself in order to transform the self or make the self appear." This self-work refers to the historical practices that have comprised Western self-subjectivation, or, more positively, self-formation, the genealogy of which Foucault devoted his last work to. As Foucault has explained it, asceticism or *ascesis* (derived from the Greek *askesis*) constitutes a node of the historical practice of ethics (which Foucault also calls the *rappport a soi*), the discourses and practices associated with how, historically, "the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject of his own actions" (263).

Foucault's asceticism then, indicates the historical practice and technique, the "self-forming activity" whereby Western man has "recognized" and moreover, formed himself "as a subject of ethics" (267). For Foucault, of course, this activity cannot simply be evaluated as positive or negative, repressive or liberatory. What interests Foucault is the way that asceticism as "self-forming activity" represents the effort or exercise (*askesis*) to elaborate, transform, or create a self. Quite broadly then, asceticism represents the notion of historical "agency" which Foucault articulated in his last work.

In his article "Ethics as Ascetics: Foucault, the History of Ethics, and Ancient Thought," Arnold Davidson argues that Foucault associated this powerful possibility for self-transformation most closely with the history of the practice of philosophy: "For Foucault himself philosophy was a spiritual exercise, an exercise of oneself in which one submitted oneself to modifications and tests, underwent changes, in order to learn to think differently" (123). In Foucault's words, this time-honored practice was the philosophical ascesis or *askesis* ("an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought") which he described as "the endeavor to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known" (9).<sup>37</sup>

Of course Foucault's definition of *askesis* here reflects his particular bias towards what he saw as its more radical possibilities ("the endeavor to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known"). The philosophical *askesis*, or more widely, asceticism itself, however, is by no means *inherently* such a radical practice. Asceticism *per se* is neither radical nor conservative. Indeed, determining the relationship of ascetic practices to the concomitant dominant culture or ideology at any specific historical time is one of the

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<sup>37</sup> Davidson credits understanding of this classical mode of philosophy to the work of Pierre Hadot. See Arnold I. Davidson, "Spiritual Exercises and Ancient Philosophy: An

primary tasks of historicizing ascetic practices, as we will see.

In his critique of Foucault's perspective on classical *askesis* in *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, David Halperin argues that "[a]ncient self-cultivation was not simply a habit of introspection but a specific 'art of life' or 'art of existence' dominated, in this case, by the principle of 'caring for oneself'" (70). Underlining the etymological roots of *askesis*, Halperin insists that "[i]t was not an attitude but a strenuous activity, a practical exercise, a constant, demanding, laborious exertion" (70).

Both David Halperin and Arnold Davidson discuss Foucault's fascination with the classical philosophical *askesis*, and, moreover, his remark that it is most noticeably absent from today's more dominantly post-Cartesian notion of philosophy as a discipline not necessarily motivated by the demands of praxis. Arguing, in contrast, that in "the ancient world *philosophy itself* was a way of life, a way of life that was distinct from everyday life, and that was perceived as strange and even dangerous" (123), Davidson tells us that it is precisely this troubled, critical relationship that philosophy as "a way of life" enjoyed in relation to the hegemonic establishment in the ancient world, that inspired Foucault "to link" the idea of the ancient philosophical

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Introduction to Pierre Hadot." *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Spring 1990).



practice of *askesis* with contemporary ethical "problematizations," for example, what Foucault would call the "homosexual *askesis*" (137).

To illustrate, Arnold Davidson argues, "it would have given Foucault genuine pleasure to think that the threat to everyday life posed by ancient philosophy had a contemporary analogue in the fears and disturbances that derive from the self-formation and style of life of being gay" (126).

Foucault's Negative Theology: An Escape from the Modern Idea of the Subject

James Bernauer, a Jesuit priest and scholar, who was also Foucault's friend, has characterized Foucault's late investigations into the genealogy of Western subjectivity as anti-humanist, precisely because they attempt to look beyond the seemingly impenetrable modern edifice of the post Cartesian-Freudian subject. Foucault's goal, according to Bernauer, is to loosen the positivistic hold that the modern sciences exercise upon our own self-understanding, which orient us toward seeking to uncover "the truth" of ourselves, or, in other words, "how modernity has fashioned us as knowable for ourselves" ("The Prisons of Man" 366).

An accomplished scholar of theology, Bernauer builds a convincing case for reading Foucault's "hermeneutic of the self" as a kind of contemporary atheology, counseling us to pursue a "continual mortification entailed by a

permanent hermeneutic and renunciation of the self.”

Bernauer explains that Foucault’s thinking was influenced by his historical study of “negative traditions” with pre-modern origins, for example, early Christian asceticism. Though Foucault did not believe in reviving such traditions, he found them useful for understanding how a negative self-hermeneutic might guide contemporary political projects that are committed to transgressing the limits of modern subjectivity.

Bernauer admits to taking liberties in imagining Foucault as possibly invested in how a Christian discursive apparatus that counseled the subject to practice self-mortification, might, in some instances, create the occasion for quite compelling instances of contemporary deontological practice.

Bernauer has demonstrated in a prolific body of work how Foucault’s thought can be profitably grasped within the context of an apophatic<sup>38</sup> tradition (or tradition of “negative theology”<sup>39</sup>) that has been largely occluded by

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38 “ ‘Apophasis,’ then is the Greek for ‘negation’ or ‘denial,’ and is the opposite of ‘kataphasis,’ ‘affirmation’...The term was given its distinctive metaphysical/religious use by Proclus, and brought thence into Christian theology by the Pseudo-Dionysius” J.P. Williams *Denying Divinity: Aphophasis in the Patristic Christian and Soto Zen Buddhist Traditions*. Oxford: Oxford U Press, 2000.

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39 Mircea Eliade’s *Encyclopedia of Religion* defines the telos of negative theology in the following quote: “Through constant negation the soul overcomes the created world, which prevents the mind from reaching its ultimate destiny” (252).

dominant Christianity.<sup>40</sup> To situate Foucault's work within the oft-overlooked tradition of negative theology, Bernauer points us to Foucault's famous statement in *Discipline and Punish*: "the soul is the prison of the body."<sup>41</sup>

Bernauer calls this "the single most important phrase in Foucault's writing."<sup>42</sup> Bernauer sees it as an effective counter-attack on the dualism lodged so firmly at the heart of Western "consciousness," or, more accurately, Western subjectivity (aka "soul").<sup>43</sup> On Foucault's distinctive phrasing and its rhetorical effect, Bernauer writes:

If the principal streams of both Western and Eastern spiritualities have been to see a dualism between body and soul and to put forward an asceticism for liberating the soul from the body, Foucault envisions a dramatically different task: creating an alienation from one's soul, [or] from how one's

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40 With its roots in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius and Philo of Alexandria, "negative theology" represents both the classical (neo-Platonic) and Alexandrian mystical strands that would be incorporated into Christianity.

41 With this succinct phrase, Foucault inverts classical and Christian ideology which has (for so long) posed flesh against spirit.

42 James Bernauer, SJ. "Foreward: Cry of Spirit" *Religion and Culture: Michel Foucault*. Ed. by Jeremy Carrette. NY: Routledge, 1999.

43 Attempting to narrativize the "historical reality of the soul" Foucault suggests that it has been the modern locus for a certain type of self-knowledge that has also been referred to as "psyche, subjectivity, personality, consciousness etc.,; on it have been built scientific techniques and discourses and the moral claims of humanism" (29-30). Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1977. P.30.

interior state and meaningful story have been constructed" (xiii).<sup>44</sup>

Arguing that "[t]he prison from which Foucault seeks escape is nothing other than the modern identity of man himself," (367) Bernauer reframes Foucault's unfinished late work as "a contemporary form of negative theology," to reveal Foucault's "effort to overcome that figure of man whom modernity fashioned as a substitute for the absolute, and whose divinization entailed a flight from humanity" (367-68). Asserting that "[t]he project of modernity was a divinization of man," Bernauer thus translates Foucault's phrase "the soul is the prison of the body" as Foucault's attempt to uncover "the incarceration of human beings within a specifically modern system of thought and practice which has so intimately become a part of them that it is no longer experienced as a series of confinements, but is embraced as the very substance of being human" (367).<sup>45</sup>

Elsewhere Bernauer specifically labels Foucault's negative theology as an "asceticism" (68), whose telos erupts into what Foucault has characterized as "the limit experience" or, as Bernauer describes it, "the mystical

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44 James Bernauer, SJ. "Foreward: Cry of Spirit" *Religion and Culture: Michel Foucault*. Ed. by Jeremy Carrette. NY: Routledge, 1999.

45 Bernauer, James S.J. "The Prisons of Man: An Introduction to Foucault's Negative Theology" *International Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. XXVII, No. 4 Issue No. 108 (December 1987).

passion of an ecstatic transcendence of the self" (70).<sup>46</sup> Insisting upon the crucial relevance of Foucault's unfinished late work to contemporary understandings of the genealogy of Western subjectivity as it emerges within the now arguable ruins of the intersecting ideologies of Christianity and Humanism, Bernauer avers that "[Foucault's] ecstatic thinking counseled escape from those relationships to self which we have inherited as children of western technologies of thought and for self-development" (75). Indeed, "Foucault's call for a renunciation of the self is basically the motto of a program for freedom as a thinker, a commitment to the task of permanent [self-]criticism" (69).

Bernaer acknowledges the fear, evinced by some of Foucault's critics, that such an appeal to a negative self-identity might be seen as a nihilism: "the ecstatic renunciation of the modern relation to the self, which is announced in Foucault's last writings, was unacceptable, because all too many in his audience have only that relation as an imagined last barrier to nihilism" (48).<sup>1</sup> However, by aligning Foucault's project to the tradition of negative theology (as he argues Foucault himself did), Bernauer calls attention to the powerful link Foucault's contemporary strategy of "dis-ontology" shares with overlooked and undervalued counter-hegemonic Christian

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46 Bernauer, James. S.J. "Michel Foucault's Ecstatic Thinking" in *The Final Foucault*. Ed. by James Bernauer and David Rasmussen. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991.

movements. In his current work *Denying Divinity: Apophasis in the Patristic Christian and Soto Zen Buddhist Traditions*, J.P. Williams agrees that it was precisely a fear of nihilism that encouraged "the undervaluation of apophasis by the mainstream of Western Christian tradition," reminding us that this undervaluation of negative theology was "driven partly by the fear that unfettered negation would so undermine the content of faith as to leave one at last with nothing to believe in" (8-9).<sup>47</sup>

In line with Bernauer and Foucault, J.P. Williams seeks to disinter the tradition of radical apophasis in order to understand and value it as a tradition that sponsors the kind of practice of "dis-ontology" Foucault's work points us to.<sup>48</sup> As we will see, Williams and Bernauer join voices with a larger group of theologians, theorists and critics (many of them feminists and queers) who now look to the apophatic

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47 J.P. Williams *Denying Divinity: Apophasis in the Patristic Christian and Soto Zen Buddhist Traditions*. Oxford: Oxford U Press, 2000.

48 Narrating the traditional trajectory of negative theology, J.P. Williams argues that "apophasis is in some sense a validation of the soteriological need to speak of the divine, coupled with a repeated recognition that each attempt so to speak is not entirely successful" (5). Williams continues: "All possible views of the divine, therefore, are to be negated...there is no point of discursive rest: all that may be done is to undertake the process of considering concepts about the divine, provisionally affirming and then negating them, and then negating the negation too" (5). J.P. Williams *Denying Divinity: Apophasis in the Patristic Christian and Soto Zen Buddhist Traditions*. Oxford: Oxford U Press, 2000.

tradition as a counter-theological tradition which can offer us crucial tools for challenging contemporary orthodoxy. Indeed, these scholars show us how the tools of negative theology are particularly well suited to forward a postmodern cultural critique of religion, while simultaneously demonstrating that such tools are not new, but rather lie at the very heart of Western spirituality's emergence.

*"I am not gay": Towards a Contemporary Homosexual Ascesis*

Foucault believed that the modern homosexual is particularly well positioned "within the social fabric" for choosing to "escape" our inherited modes of subjectivity. For this reason, Foucault made a distinct case for homosexual ascesis as a *political* goal for gays in the nineteen-eighties. ("We must escape and help others escape...readymade formulas") (137). In a more oft-quoted passage from the interview "Friendship as a Way of Life," Foucault insists that homosexuality "is a historic occasion to reopen affective and relational virtualities" (138). Indeed, Foucault asked: "How can a relational system be reached through sexual practices?" (137).

According to Foucault: "It's not only a matter of integrating this strange little practice of making love with someone of the same sex into preexisting cultures; it's a matter of constructing [creer] cultural forms" (157). Foucault argues passionately here for the

necessary creation ("There ought to be an inventiveness special to a situation like ours") rather than simple adoption of a "homosexual culture," a culture which Foucault defined as, ideally, "the instruments for polymorphic, varied, and individually modulated relationships" (139). For Foucault, who forwards a notion of dis-ontology, "the relationships we have to have with ourselves are not ones of identity, rather, they must be relationships of differentiation, of creation, of innovation" (166). This attitude outlined a particular path for gay socio-political action:

Rather than saying what we said at one time, "Let's try to re-introduce homosexuality into the general norm of social relations," let's say the reverse—"No! Let's escape as much as possible from the type of relations that society proposes for us and try to create in the empty space where we are new relational possibilities." (160)<sup>49</sup>

Foucault's notion of ascesis is immediately communicated by his use of the word "escape" here. Indeed, he asks us "as much as possible" "to create in the empty space" that is reached by moving through-away from-preexisting cultural forms, or what Foucault has called the "readymade formulas" of subjectivity that have been offered homosexuals (137). In the face of our



advanced capitalist society's qualified acceptance of gays and lesbians through the workings of commodification, Foucault's call for a homosexual ascesis to motivate the renunciation of institutionally carved and sanctioned routes to queer self-formation remains as germane as ever.

Though a necessary *renunciation* thus lies at the heart of Foucault's notion of a contemporary homosexual ascesis, we must be careful not to equate this disavowal of institutionalized culture too easily with the a-hedonistic stereotypes that have become shorthand for Christian asceticism. In his recent article "'I am not what I am'-Foucault, Christian Asceticism and a 'Way Out' of Sexuality," Mark Vernon insists that a contemporary critical grasp of asceticism must challenge stereotypical notions of it as necessarily negative, repressive, asexual, ahedonistic, etc. To grasp the subtle difference that structures Foucault's understanding of "renunciation" requires a shift in our intellectual perspective. In other words, Mark Vernon reminds us, "the aim should be not to liberate one's sexuality but to be liberated from sexuality" (201):

Instead on "coming out" Foucault suggests the term "showing oneself" which, after the reading of the Christian texts, must be implicitly coupled to the

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49 *Anti-Gay*, Mark Simpson's recent collection of essays that critiques the commodified state of gay identity and culture is a great illustration of how Foucault's notion of

act of renunciation, speaking of oneself only in order to find a "way out" of one's self, the exact opposite of conformity to a predetermined way of being. The trouble is that, in the rejection of asceticism because of its traditionally negative associations against pleasure, the crux of renunciation has been lost. (208)

Rather than as negative, Foucault sought to recast asceticism as a positive or productive practice clearly visible at the root of cultural invention. In other words, asceticism is an act of revising, recreating, or starting anew, an act that Foucault called "inventing a way of life" ["We must escape and help others to escape the two readymade formulas" (137)] that "can be shared among individuals of different age, status, and social activity" and which would "yield intense relations not resembling those that are institutionalized." (138). Asceticism is thus a way out of (or protest against) dominant cultural institutions, yet one that can itself ultimately "yield a culture and an ethics" of its own (138).

*Using Queer public sex to escape the prison of the soul*

In her contribution to *The Good Body: Asceticism in Contemporary Culture*, feminist theologian Margaret R. Miles reminds us of the need to challenge the dominant

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dis-ontology can be popularly articulated.

stereotype of asceticism as a negative activity, which thereby contains little pleasure (or reward) for its agent. To fully grasp contemporary asceticism, Miles suggests we must reverse its supposedly ahedonistic trajectory, and "[. . .] entertain the odd notion that what might be interpreted as 'negative' or destructive behavior could have not merely productive but even pleasurable effects" (49). Echoing Foucault's notion of asceticism as a "way out" of institutional roles and their strictures, Miles insists that asceticism "[. . .] acts to resist socialization," and as such a form of "resistance," can involve pleasure (62).

In calling for a contemporary "homosexual ascesis," Foucault clearly invites us to "resist socialization." Moreover, he insists that such an ascesis would not constitute a rejection of pleasure, but rather its multiplication. This refusal of the stereotype of asceticism as diametrically opposed to hedonism is essential for us to grasp if we are truly committed to envisioning a contemporary queer ascesis. Indeed, the major role that the affirmation of pleasure plays within the formation and practice of contemporary queer communities underlines its central place within our understanding of the potential for a queer ascesis.<sup>50</sup>

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50 See Joseph Bristow, "Being Gay: Politics, Identity, Pleasure." *New Formations* #9 (Winter 1989).

Nonetheless, the possible place of pleasure within a gay community still battling AIDS continues to be hotly debated. In their watershed article "Sex in Public," Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant affirm the role of sexual pleasure in the formation of "non-heteronormative counter-publics" which can act as public, communal spaces for constructing non-normative queer identities. Defending these spaces of queer public intimacy from political repression, they insist that queers use public sex "as a context for witnessing intense and personal affect while elaborating a public world of belonging and transformation."

Berlant and Warner argue that public spaces of non-normative, queer sex are targets of political repression precisely because they challenge the hegemony of the heteronormative.<sup>51</sup> However to engender true social resistance, Berlant and Warner insist that non-heteronormative pleasures must be allowed to forge "paths through publicity."<sup>52</sup> Such paths lead to the creation of

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51 Heteronormativity is more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; and education; as well as in the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture. It is hard to see these fields as heteronormative because the sexual culture straight people inhabit is so diffuse, a mix of languages they are just developing with premodern notions of sexuality so ancient that their material conditions feel hardwired into personhood.

Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner "Sex in Public." *Critical Inquiry*, Wntr 1998 v24 n2.

52 Berlant and Warner demonstrate how "heteronormative conventions of intimacy block the building of nonnormative or explicit public sexual cultures" through the definition of

queer public spaces that make "sex the consequence of public mediations and collective self-activity in a way that [make] for unpredicted pleasures."

Berlant and Warner position their argument against other homosexuals who insist that the path to homosexual acceptance lies in the affirmation of normative sexual culture which stipulates, among other things, that sex is only to be had in the private space of a monogamous domestic partnership. While they do not denigrate traditional notions of sex as intimacy, their purpose is to reveal how "the space of sexual culture has become obnoxiously cramped from doing the work of maintaining a normal metaculture." Queers create spaces of queer public sex emerge to articulate non-normative sexual cultures and make them available to other queers. Berlant and Warner describe this as "queer world making":

The queer world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies.(22) World making, as much in the mode of dirty talk as of print-mediated representation, is dispersed through incommensurate registers, by definition unrealizable as community or identity. Every cultural form, be it a novel or an after-hours club or an academic lecture, indexes a virtual social world, in ways

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sex as the "merely personal"; such designation undergirds the closing of public spaces of queer sex and pleasure.

that range from a repertoire of styles and speech genres to referential metaculture.

Because their description of queer world making sounds distinctly Foucauldian, and is indeed indebted to Foucauldian theory, Berlant and Warner feel it is necessary to defend their argument from accusations of nihilism.<sup>53</sup> But we might also ask whether their use of a Foucauldian imaginary language to describe our queer world as potentially "a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies" might problematically reproduce a "nostalgia" for premodern sexualities that Carolyn Dinshaw critiques as Foucault's tendency toward sexual utopianism.<sup>54</sup>

Dinshaw is correct in calling attention to his utopianism. But she does not abandon or refute his vision, even after submitting it to stringent critique. Indeed, we can still agree upon the vital ways that Foucault's vision still truly shapes our queer politics of pleasure; indeed, I would argue that it remains the best template we have for understanding and shaping our politics of sexuality.

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53 "To be against heteronormativity is not to be against norms. To be against the processes of normalization is not to be afraid of ordinariness. Nor is it to advocate the "existence without limit" she [Biddy Martin, representing peer critics] sees as produced by bad Foucauldians."

Let's return to the concluding section of Volume One of his *History of Sexuality*, where Foucault avers that there are a "plurality of resistances" possible, yet "by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations" (96). Suggesting that these possible resistances are not "only a reaction or rebound, forming with respect to the basic domination an underside that is in the end always passive, doomed to perpetual defeat," he shirks off the nihilism that his detractors so readily charge him with (96).

Yet Foucault's slightly cryptic tone can still prevent us from envisioning exactly what he means here. When we look more closely, however, we find that he does elaborate on these tactical resistances available to us. Indeed, he insists that they are crucially both corporeal *and* discursive, formative of both mind and body, individual and community, the sacred and the profane: these "points, knots, or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities, at times mobilizing groups or individuals in a definitive way, inflaming certain parts of the body, certain moments in life, certain types of behavior" (96). Rarely "great radical ruptures, massive binary divisions," they rather have the potential to create "cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting

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54 See the "Coda" to Carolyn Dinshaw's *Getting Medieval*, in which she debates "Michel Foucault's Middle Ages."

regroupings, furrowing areas across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds" (96, emphasis added).

This passage surely illuminates Foucault's famous conclusion to his first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, where he cryptically announces the future emergence of "a different economy of bodies and pleasures," an economy that will challenge "that austere monarchy of sex" (159). Critics either dismissed this pronouncement as either hopelessly utopian or frustratingly vague. Yet in previously describing those "points, knots, or focuses of resistance" as "inflaming certain parts of the body, certain moments in life, certain types of behavior," Foucault explicitly outlines the contours of this his "different economy of bodies and pleasures." In this dissertation I will show how three men embodied the contours of these points of resistance.

#### Asceticism and Corporeal Theory

The work of contemporary "body theorists" represents a vast and popular collection of scholarly efforts at narrating the different kinds of practices and effects that have emerged from contemporary and historical embodied experience.<sup>55</sup> Yet

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55 To see just how vast this body of work is, just type "body" or "corporeal" into your online library catalogue.



cultural/religious/queer studies critics Jeremy Carrette and Richard King are not convinced that we have as of yet managed "to write about the body outside such binary oppositions" as "mind/body, nature/nurture, and sacred/profane" ("Giving Birth to Theory" 125). Indeed, they aver, "such new spaces of thought are yet to be explored."

Carrette and King direct us to an exception in *Re-Forming the Body: Religion, Community and Modernity* precisely because its authors, Mellor and Shilling, present a historically nuanced theory of contemporary subjectivity as it emerges within late modernity. Presenting a genealogy of Western subjectivity as it has emerged through historically variable articulations of the body, Mellor and Shilling pay particular attention to location of the changing locations and practices of the sacred, which they cite as a key factor in the forming of the body. Presenting careful models for Western subjectivity as it evolves through the medieval, early modern and late modern periods, they nonetheless refuse to read this historical narrative as tracing a linear arc. Instead, they suggest that we have arrived, in the current cultural moment, at a point of collapse of historical distinctions: calling attention to precisely "those phenomena which permeate, overlap or erode the distinctions between contrasting epochs," they invite us to see how older models of subjectivity erupt within

present models (161). Indeed, they suggest that the postmodern (or late-modern) body is "re-forming" in precisely such a recursive manner.

Elaborating, Mellow and Shilling argue that "[c]ertain aspects of the disciplined and individualistic body of early modernity are being *extended*"; but, "[e]lsewhere, however, these 'disciplined bodies' are giving way to a further re-formation, centered on an involvement in sensual forms of sociality which echo the seductive, sacred corporeality of the baroque period, and which prioritise what we refer to as *tribal fealties*" (162). Citing the failure of modernity's attempts to contain the disruptive energies of corporeality by exiling the sacred to the realm of "the sublime," they claim that the ideologies upon which such attempts were founded are now short circuiting within the contradictory logics of late consumer capitalism. In the wake of this current chaos, Mellor and Shilling see a resurgence of the kind of sensual and communal experience of the sacred that they believe characterized the Medieval syncretic melange of local magic and dominant Catholicism, a *mélange* that had been largely occluded by the rise of Protestantism in the West.

I would argue that spaces of queer public sex can be read as a very corporeal relocation of the sacred into the public sphere. Furthermore, this project's goal of understanding how to identify and define a queer

asceticism, a queer sacred, and a queer mysticism has been particularly helped along by the arguments in Mellor and Shilling present in *Re-Forming the Body*.

In employing and redeploying religious terms that already carry a certain freight, I must be careful. Indeed, David Halperin and Jeremy Carrette have criticized James Miller for using a set of religious terms that carry traditional meanings that he leaves largely uncritiqued in his scholarship. In their evaluation of James Miller's *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, both scholars claim that Miller labels Foucault "a kind of mystic—philosophically; sexually; politically" (qtd. in Carrette 17) to forward "a kind of literary strategy to cause sensation" (30).<sup>56</sup> Claiming that Miller both sensationalizes and "'normalises' Foucault's psychosexual being" through "developing distorted interpretations about his life in terms of a preoccupation with death and sado-masochism" (16), Carrette builds upon David Halperin's powerful critique of Miller's methodology in *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, objecting to the biographer's fast and easy use of a "mystical iconography" (that includes "religious and occult terminology such as 'hermetic,' 'esoteric,' 'visionary,' 'erotic ecstasy,' 'ascetic,' and even 'gnomic'") to exoticize "gay sexual practices" by

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56 Carrette, Jeremy. "Prologue to a Confession of the Flesh." *Religion and Culture: Michel Foucault*. Ed. by Jeremy Carrette. NY: Routledge, 1999.

dressing them in "an elaborate and esoteric language"<sup>57</sup>  
which Miller shows no acumen for.<sup>58</sup>

Carrette interrogates Miller's uncritical use of the label "mystic" because it "fall[s] back into the traditional categories of theological authority," and, most crucially, "psychological individualism" (22).<sup>59</sup> Thus while Miller may well mean to enlighten and affirm Foucault's radical sexual theory by linking it to the philosopher's alleged sexual practices and labeling this nexus "mystical," such a move actually reifies the latter term within a rather limited historico-cultural context: that of a modernist-Romantic ontology (phenomenology).<sup>60</sup>

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57 "Miller continually amalgamates themes in Foucault's writing with religious ideas of self-sacrifice and martyrdom; for example, he takes Foucault's desire to obliterate identity, the 'shattering of the philosophical subject,' the death of the author and Foucault's interest in St. Anthony in order to position the experience of S/M within a mystical framework. Miller fails to appreciate the different order of these experiences and face the central fact that activities in S/M are not acts of missionary zeal, a desire to die for Christ, or attempts to find union with God in any specific theological sense. There are also huge social and political differences in the conception of suffering in the Californian bathhouses and that of religious martyrs of the Middle Ages, and to suggest that Foucault understood his own experience theologically is to seriously misread his work on religion" (Carrette 25). Carrette's argument here is complicated by Karmen MacKendrick's recent *Counterpleasures*, which places contemporary s/m practices into the historical context of Christian asceticism. Mackendrick, Karmen. *Counterpleasures*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.

58 According to Carrette, "Miller shows no sign of reading the texts of Christian 'mysticism' or of any other 'mystical' tradition" (18).

59 Carrette claims that "Miller's work on the 'limit-experience' misreads both Bataille and Foucault by translating the term into a contemporary psychological event, which as Grace Jantzen's study on mystical experience reveals is developed from a Jamesian interpretation of mysticism. " Miller reminds us that Jantzen contests the modern tendency to define mystical experience solely as "'subjective psychological states or feelings of the individual'" (23).

60 In her groundbreaking work *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, Grace M. Jantzen (Jeremy Carrette's doctoral tutor) claims that "ever since" William James wrote his

Of course, Michel Foucault was fascinated with the idea of the "limit attitude" as precisely a mode for escaping modern ontological limits. In his key essay "What Is Enlightenment?" Foucault sets out to define "enlightenment" (via Kant) as our modern desire to free ourselves from subjection to authority, which is, as Foucault sees it, a necessary attempt to free ourselves from the concept of self that the modern sciences have bequeathed us. Labeling this an "attitude" or "what the Greeks called an *ethos*," (39), he defines it as "a mode of relationship that has to be established with oneself" (41). Most importantly, Foucault characterizes this self-relation as an "indispensable asceticism" (41), or "an ascetic elaboration of the self" (42) which is precisely "not faithfulness to doctrinal elements, but rather the permanent reactivation of an attitude—that is, of a philosophical ethos" (42) that he describes as a "a historical ontology of ourselves" (45) or, "a historico-practical test of the limits that we may go beyond, and thus as work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as

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nineteenth-century opus *Varieties of Religious Experience*, the vast majority of modern scholars have problematically defined "mystical experience as essentially involving the four characteristics of ineffability, noetic quality, transiency and passivity" (7). In other words, after James, the historical study and interpretation of mystical experience has tended to reify subjectivity: "Union with God is simply assumed to be a subjective psychological state. Accordingly, there is no consideration of moral issues, for example, let alone of the social and political context in which certain people were allowed to count as mystics while others were not" (5). Jantzen, *Grace. Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*. Cambridge :Cambridge University Press, 1995.

free beings" (47).<sup>61</sup> As we will see, this asceticism is what Foucault calls a "practice of freedom."

Another way of understanding this asceticism is to consider Foucault's earlier discussions of what he called the "limit attitude," or a desire "through experience to reach that point of life which lies as close as possible to the impossibility of living, which lies at the limit or extreme" ("Remarks on Marx" 31). The desired result of engendering such experience is a "tearing" of "the subject from itself in such a way that it is no longer the subject as such, or that it is completely 'other' than itself so that it may arrive at its annihilation, its disassociation" (Remarks on Marx 31). Foucault credits Nietzsche and Bataille for directing him onto this path of "de-subjectifying" himself, whose goal, he argues, is "to prevent me from always being the same" (32).

Guibert, Wojnarowicz and Foucault all share this concept of "freedom," which they enact in their refusal of a prefabricated subjectivity that has been handed to them; they prefer, rather, to invent their own, a task which no doubt poses a constant, difficult challenge.

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61 To proceed with this experiment is to construct "the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them" ("What is Enlightenment" 50). According to Foucault, this "historical ontology of ourselves has to answer an open series of questions": "How are we constituted as subjects of our own knowledge? How are we constituted as subjects who exercise or submit to power relations? How are we constituted as moral subjects of our own actions?" (49)

While Foucault offers us a theoretical articulation of these men's project of self-abstraction whose goal is evading the "preinvented existence," they, on the other hand, gives poetic and practical form to Foucault's complex discussions.

Chapter Two: Herve Guibert: AIDS and the Image of the Dandy-  
Ascetic<sup>62</sup>

I am very truly ill. From time to time I find myself forgetting about it completely. It's like a looking glass, one gets used to one's own looking glass and when one discovers oneself suddenly in an unknown hotel mirror one sees something else. The way others look at me now makes me feel as if I am someone else, someone different from what I had thought myself to be, and who is doubtless the real me, an aged man who has trouble getting out of a reclining chair. My book is still not out here, it has changed all that a bit, the way people look at AIDS sufferers. In fact what I wrote was a personal letter faxed directly to the hearts of a hundred thousand readers, it's something extraordinary for me. I am busy writing them a new letter. The one I am writing to you here and now.

In this quote from *The Compassion Protocol*, the second novel in his trilogy of AIDS "auto-fictions," Herve Guibert describes the strange, ambivalent power that aesthetic self-regard plays within his ongoing experience of AIDS (103-104).<sup>63</sup> The mirror, a metaphor for the practice, is multivalent here, representing both loss and discovery of self. As the author's figurative strategy slides almost imperceptibly into metonymy, self becomes text. Where Guibert's mirror provides self-reflection, it distorts. His text, however, does not. Self-representation succeeds in the latter instance

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62 In his introduction to the Spring 1995 *Nottingham French Studies* special issue on Herve Guibert, Jean-Pierre Boulé admits that of all the epithets that have been used to describe Guibert, "dandy janséniste et solitaire" (Jansenist dandy and hermit) is the most fitting.



because it is wholly oriented to an audience, no longer solely focused inward.

In this image, the mirror represents the threat that the aesthete's narcissistic self-regard goes nowhere. In this chapter's argument, however, Herve Guibert ultimately transforms this threat by fashioning a strategy of self-representation that is open to the regard of others, who are thus asked to confront AIDS when perhaps they'd heretofore have turned away.

The novel preceding *The Compassion Protocol*, the first installment of Guibert's AIDS trilogy, *To the Friend That Did Not Save My Life*, remains his most critically acclaimed work. Indeed, the book exploded upon the French literary scene and established Guibert's reputation as a literary "star," a role he permanently inscribed on the hearts of the thousands who watched him promote the book on the French television program "Apostrophes" in 1990. In the introduction to his translation of the third novel in Guibert's AIDS trilogy, *The Man in the Red Hat*, James Kirkup describes the author's remarkable appearance on the French television show:

His diaphanous appearance, his handsome face appearing even haughtier with its more pronounced cheekbones and wasted flesh, his beautiful sad

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63 Edmund White coined the term "auto-fiction" to describe Guibert's notoriously slippery combination of autobiography and fiction. See "Herve Guibert, an Obituary" in White's *The*

mouth, the disdainful pose of his noble head, his pure, strangely refulgent blue eyes shaded by long, fine lashes, formed the very image of a martyred saint. Even more impressive was his careful stillness among the energetic gesturings and posturings of the other participants in this enthralling hour and a half (vi).<sup>64</sup>

Guibert was gaunt and frail from the ravaging effects of both his illness and the AZT (and soon after, DDI) he was taking as treatment. Yet as Kirkup attests, the author's great beauty was not obscured by sickness. Rather, it was heightened, intensified (and set off--as we know from Guibert's own retelling of the media appearance--by a brightly colored fedora, a sartorial touch that would afterward become his trademark).<sup>65</sup>

Kirkup's description of Guibert underlines the young author's striking combination of beatitude and attitude. With his haughty, "disdainful pose" tempered by an ethereal, saintly "stillness," Guibert projects the

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*Burning Library.*

64 Ross Chambers provides us with a similar description of Guibert's appearance in his discussion of the author's video-diary *La Pudeur ou L'Impudeur*: "Painfully gaunt, it is in other respects, however, a beautiful body: the face spiritualized by the visibility of its bone structure, a shoulder recalling the angularity of certain Picasso figures..." from Chambers, Ross, *Facing It: AIDS Diaries and the Death of the Author*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 1998, p.45.

65 Edmund White describes first meeting Guibert in 1983: "...he had the most arresting, angelic face I've ever seen, with his heavy down-turned lips, vast blue eyes, perfect skin, blond curls. Later he cut all his hair off, which only threw the beauty of his features into higher relief, freed at last from their conventional Burne-Jones frame" (357).

very image of a dandy-saint, an ascetic-aesthete. This chapter will explore Guibert's performance of this queer pairing, identifying it as the primary mode of his practice of ascesis, an aestheticizing strategy of self-creation he invents to cope with his personal experience of AIDS. Mirroring Michel Foucault's descriptions of self-fashioning as aesthetic strategy, Guibert shapes his rapidly deteriorating self into a beautiful work of art. Although Guibert had used his self-experience as material for his oeuvre consistently in the past, his experience with AIDS only intensifies his method, raising precipitously the stakes of his project of self-invention.

I will document the trajectory of Guibert's dandy-ascetic identity as it evolves through the arc of the first two novels in his trilogy of AIDS "auto-fictions," *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* (hereafter referred to as *To the Friend*), and *The Compassion Protocol*. A careful reading of Guibert's evolution as a dandy-ascetic in these texts guides this chapter's argument for the dual nature of the author's experience of AIDS. Initially, Guibert's illness stimulates a dormant narcissism already inherent in his stance as an aesthete, inviting him to retreat into a solitary and bitter existence. However, by simultaneously providing him with the subject, form and occasion for performing a very powerful, public aesthetic self-representation, AIDS

eventually teaches him to reaffirm the efficacy of love and community in the face of his disease.

The notion of a "dandy-ascetic" allows us to keep an eye on all these possibilities. And though we may regard this newfangled term as paradoxical at first glance, Geoffrey Harpham, author of *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*, reminds us of the "manifestly ascetic quality" of the modern conception of the aesthetic. According to Harpham, modern Western culture shifts the mantle of "traditional religious concern with self-negation, self-overcoming, self-alienation, [and] self-transcendence" into the realm of its aesthetic ideology. Art, then, offers moderns a path to "achieving a pure presentness, an openness to being" (358).

In his discussions on the ascetic origins of modern subjectivity, Foucault gestures briefly to the emergence of the nineteenth-century dandy/aesthete, only to mourn his disappearance: "We have hardly any remnant of the idea in our society that the principle work of art which one must take care of, the main area to which one must apply aesthetic values, is oneself, one's life, one's existence" (Rabinow 271).

In mourning himself, Herve Guibert embodies the role of the dandy-ascetic who fashions something beautiful ("dazzling and sleek" as he labels the AIDS virus in *To the Friend*) out of the hideous thing that lies deep

within him. Guibert's self-aestheticizing strategy helps him mediate (and thus ameliorate) the devastating effects of his disease. Even more crucially, aesthetic self-creation ultimately prevents him from suffering alone, because it orients him to a public that embraces him with an overwhelming expression of affection.

In these two novels, Guibert narrates his evolution from embittered solitude to empowered public performance using the immediate, words-thrown-on-the-page style of an intimate journal. Indeed, speed is of the essence, as Guibert constantly affirms the central role that the act of "self-writing," to use Foucault's term, plays in his survival of AIDS. Above all a "dynamic force," Guibert's writing alternates its relation to the author: at one time it is his disease (or just a description of it), at others it is an anecdote, even a possible cure (*Compassion* 11, 106).<sup>66</sup> Guibert also understands the disease as "a unique apprenticeship," a type of ascetic training which, in the Stoic tradition, requires that Guibert squarely face his own death in order to fully live his own life:

AIDS, by setting an official limit to our life span—six years of seropositivity, plus two years with AZT in the best of cases, or a few months without it—made us men who were fully conscious of our lives,

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<sup>66</sup> In France, the publicity slogan for *To The Friend That Did Not Save My Life* was: "The first victory of words over AIDS."

and freed us from our ignorance. (*To the Friend* 164-165)

In *To the Friend*, Guibert reveals that this Stoic training was a gift offered to him by his friend and mentor, the character of the older philosopher Muzil, whom Guibert publicly acknowledged as posthumously modeled after his close friend Michel Foucault. In *To the Friend*, Muzil offers Guibert the collection of surviving fragments that represent Epictetus' ethical teachings. Of this gift, Guibert relates: "I had a copy of it, covered in glassine, that Muzil had plucked from his library shelf a few months before his death to give to me, as one of his favorite books; he suggested that it might comfort and calm me at a time when I was particularly upset and unable to sleep" (66).

The Stoic philosophy of Epictetus also survives within the *Meditations*, penned by his student, Marcus Aurelius. This inter-generational, pedagogical-philosophical relationship is mirrored by Muzil and Guibert's friendship in the novel, which thus represents the unbroken chain of teachers and students who passed the Stoic tradition from one to another from classical Rome, through Medieval and Renaissance Europe, and into Western modernity.<sup>67</sup> However, in *To the Friend*, Guibert depicts himself as deeply disillusioned by his mentor's

failure to actually practice these Stoic ethics in the face of his own death from AIDS. In response, Guibert molds himself into the true philosopher that Muzil was unable to be, he who enacts the Socratic role of facing his own death publicly, in an act not marked by narcissism, but by self-effacement, done for the pedagogical benefit of others.<sup>68</sup>

#### Guibert's "Auto-Fiction": the Ascetics of the Anti-Memoir

To preface this chapter's argument, I must underscore the perils of too easily categorizing Guibert's AIDS texts as autobiographical in any strict sense. Although Guibert says himself that he is writing "a personal letter" and that he was "telling a story whose beginning I knew, as well as its development and its end, because I had lived it myself," (Compassion 104, 149), he simultaneously asserts, "It is when what I am writing takes the form of a journal that I most strongly feel that I am writing fiction" (Compassion 72).

It may be helpful for us to grasp this paradox as a signal of Guibert's specific practice of asceticism. Indeed, Geoffrey Harpham has defined asceticism quite

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<sup>67</sup> See Marcia Colish, *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985. See also Lawrence C. Becker, *A New Stoicism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.

broadly as "any act of self-denial undertaken as a strategy of empowerment or gratification."<sup>69</sup> Brad Epps forwards a similar, though more specific claim on behalf of Guibert. "Along with self-denial, then, there is self-textualization. The 'text' becomes a site or occasion of denial and, perhaps more subtly, of affirmation: a rewriting and rereading, a refiguring of self and, even more, of humanity" (84-85).<sup>70</sup>

Guibert enacts his aesthetic identity throughout the major part of *To the Friend* in a traditionally modern fashion, emphasizing his artistic detachment from any social context.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, Guibert's identity in the novel fully encompasses the modern aesthetic realm: he is simultaneously artifact and artist, art critic and art collector. Entombing himself within a beautiful, anti-social aesthetic narcissism, Guibert uses the aesthetic as a means for escaping his own profoundly ambivalent relation to himself, an impulse that only intensifies after his diagnosis with AIDS.

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68 In his discussion of Guibert's novel, Lawrence Schehr argues that the "Muzil/Foucault" character "teaches someone how to die and how to have been an artist...while all the while ignoring the Stoic truth of death." *Alcibiades at the Door* (187).

69 Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1987 (xiii).

70 Brad Epps, "Technoasceticism and Authorial Death in Sade, Kafka, Barthes, and Foucault" in *Differences* 8.3 (1996).

71 Geoffrey Harpham describes modernist aesthetic ideology wherein "art characteristically emerges at the expense of the artist, who suffers privation in order to prepare himself for creation" (357). *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*.



For example, in *To the Friend*, Guibert announces, as he does many times, that he has given up sex, "preferring to accumulate new objects and drawings around me, like a pharaoh preparing the furnishings of his tomb, with his own image multiplied over and over to mark the entrance" (195). The potency of Guibert's self-denial is apparent throughout *To the Friend*, wherein he mostly uses AIDS as a clear rationale for removing himself from his circle of friends and lovers. Though this response mimics the hermeticism enacted by the ascetic, it also marks a deeply conscious self-mortification; indeed, the reader can see how painful it is for Guibert to deny himself the pleasures of his tremendous sociality--and the very powerful capacity to love and feel ties to others which drives it.

Guibert the narrator opens *To the Friend* in Rome (where the real Guibert resided on a state grant for two years from 1987-1989), identifying this as the period when he first began to suspect that he harbored the HIV virus within his body. Guibert hasn't told anyone what he suspects, and his growing fear fuels his sense of isolation, a sense that his "exile" in Rome only heightens.

Although Guibert already has, to assuage his fears, consulted a multitude of doctors (most of them quacks), he has not yet taken the HIV test. He swears, however, that he is certain he can read his diagnosis in the gaze

of others: "Does it show in my eyes? I don't worry so much anymore about keeping my gaze human as I do about acquiring one that is too human, like the look you see in the eyes of the concentration camp inmates in the documentary *Night and Fog*" (6).

"I'm alone here," writes Guibert (4). Of his circle of friends back in Paris ("who can be counted on the fingers of one hand") Guibert admits that "they feel sorry for me, they worry about me, they think I'm not taking good care of myself," but dismisses their attempts at compassion on the grounds that he's actually "a man who has just discovered that he doesn't like his fellow men" (4). Such an anti-social posture is endemic to the dandy, as paradoxically social and performative a being as he/she may seem. Indeed, though oriented to the public, at heart, the dandy often holds it in hostile regard.

In *Rising Star: Dandyism, Gender, and Performance in the Fin De Siecle*, Rhonda Garelick insists that the dandy's "most important attribute" is "his self-containment": the dandy, Garelick argues, "turns his back completely on the outside world, sequestering himself" within the project of producing a "reified, immobilized self" (5). To illustrate, Garelick points to one of the most influential dandies of nineteenth-century literature, Duc Jean Floressas Des Esseintes, the

protagonist of Joris-Karl Huysmans' *A Rebours* (*Against Nature*).

#### The Dandy-Ascetic and the Threat of Narcissism

The character of Des Esseintes is a crucial figure for this chapter's argument, as he represents the original dandy-ascetic, a weak-constituted aristocrat who, in his "contempt for humanity" removes himself to "a refined Thebaid, a desert hermitage equipped with all the modern conveniences...in which he might take refuge from the incessant deluge of human stupidity" (Huysmans 22).<sup>72</sup> Huysmans' descriptions of Des Esseintes, who, physically and mentally exhausted at age thirty, discovers that he is "utterly alone, completely disillusioned, abominably tired," finds an uncanny parallel in the narrator of *To The Friend*. Like Des Esseintes, Guibert has also run the gamut of every vice available to him, only to find himself bored, ill, and deeply anti-social.

Des Esseintes, in the midst of his illness, experiences "the human face as glimpsed in the street" as "one of the keenest torments he had been forced to

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<sup>72</sup> Of the Thebaid (which was the Egyptian desert site of the first Christian monastic communities), Geoffrey Harpham writes: "the desert was an ideal site for asceticism, and the man who went there placed himself under a virtual obligation to reinvent himself, creating a mode of being that owed nothing to family, community, genealogy, or even subjectivity" (*The Ascetic Imperative* 24).

endure" (Huysmans 39).<sup>73</sup> Guibert feels literally exposed when in the public eye:

Long before my positive test results confirmed that I had the disease, I'd felt my blood suddenly stripped naked, laid bare, as though it had always been clothed or covered...From that moment on, I would have to live with this exposed and denuded blood, like an unclothed body that must make its way through a nightmare. My blood, unmasked, everywhere and forever. (6)

In Huysmans' novel, *Des Esseintes* is indeed "utterly alone"; no other characters share the stage with him apart from the nameless doctors he consults to treat his maladies and the servant couple that silently and almost invisibly attend to his needs.<sup>74</sup> In *To the Friend*, however, although Guibert often retreats to the cold embrace of solitude, he is never truly alone. Quite to the contrary, Guibert has a small circle of intimates, most of them gay men who share his dandiacal attributes and belong to the same rarefied Parisian high cultural

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73 Ironically, during one of his many visits to a host of different doctors, one of them diagnoses Guibert as suffering from "dysmorphophobia...a hatred of all forms of deformity" (38).

74 The servants are sequestered within another part of the house, and since *Des Esseintes* sleeps during the day, he does not have to offend himself with their appearance; "However, since the woman would have to pass alongside the house occasionally to get to the woodshed, and he had no desire to see her commonplace silhouette through the window, he had a costume made for her of Flemish faille, with a white cap and a great black hood let down on her shoulders, such as the Beguines still wear" (Huysmans 32).

milieu as he does. However, the text of *To the Friend* charts Guibert's increasing mistrust of the efficacy of these gay friendships in the face of AIDS. Not only does he fear that none of his friends will help "save his life"; he is also constantly alert to the inevitability of their "impending treachery," the inevitable product of what he sees as their own inescapable narcissism. When they do confirm his worst fears, they provide Guibert with a mirror in which he ultimately sees and critiques himself (76).

#### Two Friends that Did Not Save His Life

Amongst the close circle of friends who constitute Guibert's coterie in *To the Friend*, the friend who literally fails to save his life is Bill, an older gay male who manages a pharmaceutical corporation, and has promised to inject Guibert with the experimental AIDS vaccine that his company is just beginning to test. When Guibert first finds out about the vaccine from Bill, he ponders the luck of their friendship:

Why had that guy sat across from me at the fast-food restaurant on the Boulevard Saint Germain where I was eating alone on that autumn evening in 1973, fifteen years ago, when I was eighteen? And he, how old was he at the time? Thirty, thirty-five, the age I am now? I was terribly lonely, and he was probably as lonely as I was, if not more. (161)

The scenario that Guibert recounts here--his first encounter with Bill--places their friendship very clearly within a traditional Socratic mode, one of the archetypal versions of a classical ascetic training, within which an older, wiser man takes a younger, beautiful boy under his tutelage. Indeed, as Guibert describes him, Bill is a deeply cultured and refined gentleman. Whether driving through the streets of Paris in his Jaguar, "stocked with Wagner tapes," jetting across Europe to see the opera, or writing to Guibert from some luxurious hotel, Bill is firmly ensconced the gay, cosmopolitan high-cultural milieu that Guibert himself emulates (169).

Guibert, however, begins to suspect the shallowness of his friend's affections when he finds out, quite by accident, that Bill has already given his company's experimental vaccine to a newly seropositive Spaniard named Eduardo, a "slender young man, like a startled fawn, who blushed easily." Eduardo clearly qualifies for Bill's immediate aid and affection because he is young and pretty, an ephebe who has replaced the older Guibert, who at 35, is too old to play the role (226). Witnessing Bill's betrayal, Guibert admits that he had "had a certain suspicion": "but it was too mind-numbing for even me to believe" (227).

"From that day on I stopped hearing from Bill," utters the deadpan Guibert, who chalks up Bill's flight to a deep seated narcissism which manifested itself as a

"phobia about obliging friends" (170). The "gangrene of his relationships," says Guibert, was Bill's desire "to remain free as long as possible" (168). So although Bill pops in and out of his friends' lives "with a royal flourish, like a bull in the china shop of our friendships," bearing gifts of expensive dinners or "a case of Mouton-Rothschild he'd bought for a few million francs at auction at Druout's," he kept everyone at a safe distance, fearful of any real intimacy because of its attendant demands. Of course, Guibert ultimately understands and accepts Bill's treachery because he is intimately familiar with the narcissism that underlies it.

Guibert shares his most important friendship in the novel with the character of Muzil, a philosopher who, until his death from AIDS, serves as Guibert's older mentor and best friend. In the novel, Muzil and Guibert's relationship also fulfills the Socratic model of love and learning amongst men. In reality, as Edmund White recalls, Guibert, who "was perhaps Foucault's best friend," was originally part of an all-male group of talented young intellectuals who constituted Foucault's inner circle: "all novelists, all gay, all attractive in a slender, ambiguous way, a bit like the willowy ephebes gathered around Plato in the painting by Théodore Chassériau in the Musée d'Orsay" (White 357).

The character of Muzil, his most important friend, also fails Guibert by failing to practice the very ascetic philosophy he preaches, which is revealed through his unwillingness to face his own death of AIDS with openness and bravery. After witnessing this failure, Guibert decides to perform the Stoic exercise of confronting his own death, in the public fashion that his mentor, Muzil, had refused to do.

As Michel Foucault's best friend, Herve Guibert was one of the few people who actually witnessed the celebrated philosopher's otherwise quite private death (perhaps unknowingly) of AIDS; and though Guibert carefully draws a curtain of fiction around these events, his use of them to propel the narrative of *To the Friend* drew much public criticism. Defending this betrayal, Guibert the narrator writes,

I knew that Muzil would have been so hurt if he'd known I was writing reports of everything like a spy, like an adversary, all those degrading little things, in my diary, which was perhaps destined (that was the worst of it) to survive him, and to bear witness to a truth he would have liked to erase around the periphery of his life, to leave only the well-polished bare bones enclosing the black diamond—gleaming and impenetrable, closely guarding its secrets. (88)



In a fascinating feat of narcissistic logic, Guibert ultimately decides that he has the "right" to tell Muzil's story because he realizes, "it wasn't so much my friend's last agony I was describing as it was my own, which was waiting for me and would be just like his, for it was now clear that besides being bound by friendship, we would share the same fate in death" (91). Guibert learns a profound lesson from witnessing the shame and secrecy that ignobly shrouded his friend's death, and in doing so comes slowly to understand that he, in dying, must take a very different path. Publicity, Guibert realizes, is his only route.

For example, Guibert now realizes that testing himself for HIV is an ethical act of responsibility he must fulfill for himself and for the others in his life; he is also aware that the act would result in "propelling me publicly into an openly admitted stage of the disease." He had strenuously avoided such openness and honesty in the past. However, he now knows "there's a stage in this sickness when keeping it secret doesn't matter anymore, it even becomes hateful and burdensome" (40, 46). Rather than shy away from such publicity, Guibert decides to embark upon the path it would take him on. As we will see, in his next novel, *The Compassion Protocol*, this becomes a very public performance of his experience of AIDS.

The Dandy Finds His Public in Herve Guibert's *The  
Compassion Protocol*

Near the end of *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*, Herve Guibert sees his reflection in a mirror as he sits having his blood drawn--an act that would soon become a constantly recurring ritual for him until the day of his death. However in this instance Guibert realizes a crucial change in attitude toward the profound transformations that AIDS has enacted upon his body:

I saw myself at that moment in a mirror, and thought I looked extraordinarily handsome, when for months I'd been seeing nothing more in my reflection than a skeleton. I'd just discovered something; in the end, I would've had to get used to this cadaverous face that the mirror invariably shows me, as though it already belongs no longer to me but to my corpse, and I would've had to succeed, as the height or the renunciation of narcissism, in loving it. (223)

In *The Compassion Protocol*, Guibert transforms his suffering into a beautiful thing, an aesthetic artifact for the public consumption. By doing so, Guibert redeems the figure of the dandy-ascetic in his refusal to suffer in silence and isolation.<sup>75</sup> Guibert thus interrupt the

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<sup>75</sup> See Lee Edelman's discussion of this scene in "The Mirror and the Tank." Contrasting Guibert's narcissism with the more militant, masculine homosexual ascesis of Larry Kramer and, even, ACT-UP, Edelman warns gay men against locking themselves into one model for an AIDS activist ascesis.

dandy's solipsistic pose (exemplified by J.K. Huysmans' figure of Des Esseintes, who in his illness retreats to his "refined Thebaid," deepening his distrust and disdain for his fellow men ). Instead, Guibert orients his suffering to the public view in an attempt to make it valuable--even beautiful--for others. Narrating *The Compassion Protocol* largely from within the confines of the hospital clinic, he effectively transforms this site into a site of aesthetic pleasure and epiphany.

Guibert's attitude toward the space of the clinic changes drastically in *The Compassion Protocol*. Whereas in *To The Friend* he had portrayed this site as the very portal into a depersonalization that course of AIDS inexorably initiates, in *The Compassion Protocol* he reverses this process by giving voice and embodiment to his clinical experiences through a carefully nuanced, self-reflexive aesthetic representation of them. Though AIDS still operates as a depersonalizing force, Guibert will control his aesthetic representation of this force. Quite literally then, Guibert brings a camera into the clinic, where, he says "[e]ach time I become the voyeur spying on myself, the documentarist" (88). Guibert casts himself here as the *auteur* of his experience of AIDS, which he admits has "now become the nonstop movie of my life" (59).<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> The irony here is manifold. For one, Guibert gained his initial fame for writing the script of the 1984 film "L'Homme Blessé." Moreover, at the time when he begins *The*

In this section of my paper I wish to highlight the agency that Guibert exercises in participating, as artist, in the experience and representation of his suffering. Indeed, early on in *The Compassion Protocol*, we see that this is his only means and strategy for survival at the hands of his disease and a medical establishment that is, ironically, his only other chosen means of survival. In this novel (and in the film diary he is creating at the same time), Guibert literally and metaphorically seizes the tools of the medical establishment and uses them to fashion a series of aesthetic tableaux.

Guibert appropriates the depersonalizing jargon of the medical establishment and fashions it as a personal aesthetic language. "I'd like to be able to use medical jargon perfectly, it's like a code, it gives me the feeling that in their presence I'm not a little boy in front of whom the grown-ups speak a foreign language when talking about fucking" (89). Alluding here to the invasive medical procedures that have become his daily diet, Guibert insists that "It's my own soul I am dissecting every day...I put it through all kinds of examinations, photograph its cross-sections, subject it to magnetic resonance tests, endoscopies, radiographies and scanners whose negatives I am now presenting you

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*Compassion Protocol*, Guibert has been engaged by a French television producer to create a video diary of his experience of AIDS. Guibert's "La Pudeur and L'Impudeur" was

with, so that you may decipher them upon the luminous plate of your own sensibility" (67). In a Foucauldian reversal of the Western idea that the body is the soul's prison, a logic that would then insist upon the mortification of the body for the sake of the soul's health, Guibert puts his soul under the knife his hand wields. Meanwhile, of course, the medical doctors are doing the same to his body.

Undergoing a brutal fibroscopy presents Guibert with the occasion to parody the modern artist's attempt to maintain an objective, "disinterested" stance towards the subject of his art. "In a tub the nurse is washing the big black tube they'll soon be shoving down my gullet," he recounts with aplomb before the procedure begins (46). This deadpan, dispassionate stance fails miserably, shifting into high melodrama as soon as Guibert must endure the experience of having a camera brutally forced down his throat:

I'm suffocating, I cannot take this tube they are thrusting down my trachea until it reaches my stomach, I have spasms, contractions, hiccups, I want to reject it, spit it out, vomit it out of me, I am slavering and groaning. The thought of suicide comes back, of the most absolute form of physical humiliation, the most definitive. (46)

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televised posthumously.

"At one fell swoop," Guibert wrenches the camera out of his trachea and interrupts the procedure, which is then only delayed.

The terrible irony at work here is that the camera, be it medical or otherwise, as a technology of aesthetic representation, was something that Guibert had previously been master of. Before his illness, he was an accomplished photographer, a prominent photography critic for the French leftist and intellectual daily *La Liberation*, and author of several books on visual criticism. Once infamous for his explicitly neo-Sadean critical stance, perhaps Guibert could not have previously imagined the true depths of violence that visual representation could be taken to.

During his second fibroscopy, a double dose of valium assists him in taking the camera down into the swollen depths of his stomach. Invited by his doctor to look "through the eyepiece myself," he refuses, only to regret this later. During this same period, Guibert relishes his new role as video diary *autueur*, as he has been commissioned by a French television producer to create a video diary of his experience of AIDS. Though at times his diminishing health renders him ambivalent about making the film, it never stops him from imagining his multiple medical procedures as possible *mise en scene*. Guibert is fascinated by the idea of AIDS as his "so photogenic torture"; he even offers to model nude for

several of his artist-friends. Subsequently, he is asked to participate in theater performance, in the nude.

Criticized by a friend for his narcissistic insistence on taking his own "unveiling to its bitter end," Guibert realizes quite the opposite is true, that these are gestures that actually reveal his humility, reflective of his own "very great compassion for this ruined body, which had to be sheltered from human sight. Not a moment too soon" (17). Guibert's suffering ushers in a new insight: making a spectacle of himself is no longer tainted by narcissism.

It is crucial to note that Guibert's fame in France, which before *To The Friend* was definitely limited to the upper echelons of the European art and cinema cadres, was always intertwined with his renowned beauty. Writers such as Edmund White have extolled the wonders of his youthful, pre-AIDS beauty, which is evinced by the many self-portraits he took of himself. Guibert is faced now with the tremendous loss of this former self. He chooses, nonetheless, to walk in the direction of his new self, rather than mourn the loss of the old, accepting it, perhaps as both death and new life.

In *The Compassion Protocol* we see evidence of Guibert's newly found public in a passage where he gets on a bus to go meet a friend.<sup>77</sup> As is typical throughout

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<sup>77</sup> Guibert discovered his public upon the release of his book *To the Friend*, which was a huge success in France.

the novel, Guibert first notes the clothes that he insists upon adorning his emaciated body with: "I was wearing this already-wrinkled pale almost green jacket, with its imitation ivory buttons, which I had purchased a few days earlier at 'Comme des garçons' where the adorable assistant, Jean-Marc, had discreetly let himself be called away when the moment came to try it on" (97-98).

As Guibert sits on the bus, a "pretty" young girl "wearing Berber jewelry" gets on and sits across from him.<sup>78</sup> As the bus moves through the Paris streets, it becomes apparent to Guibert that the young girl is staring intently at him: "at first I paid no attention to her," remarks Guibert. "She began to betray an increasingly troubled attentiveness as she met my eyes, that she increasingly attempted to disguise, to render indeed inscrutable" (97). As the girl moves to exit the bus, she stops in front of Guibert, who relates: "she was still visibly hesitating to speak, then took the plunge. With a subtle smile full of graciousness and discretion, she said: 'You remind me of a very well-known writer...' I replied: 'Very well-known, I wonder...' She: 'I've made no mistake. I just wanted to tell you that I think you are very handsome.'" (98) The girl, "without another word,"

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78 Thanks to my dissertation committee for pointing out that Guibert represents his newly found, caring public through the image of a female reader (who wears African jewelry).



disappears, leaving Guibert "overwhelmed, grateful, on the brink of tears" (98).

Such public recognition affirms that with the publication of *To the Friend That Did Not Save My Life*, Guibert finds his audience and simultaneously finds his role as *eminence grise* (as older, venerated writer), a role he performs with relish. Toward the novel's end, Guibert admits that his life as an invalid is intertwined with the lives of others, those who form his public and those to whom he looks for help.

Writing from his favorite place of retreat on the Isle of Elba, Herve Guibert waxes on the pleasure of being "treated like a venerable old writer"; he enjoys the role, playing it to the hilt with his walking cane and fedora and carefully arranged scarves. But most crucially, this role has invited him to make a major change in his orientation to others. While before he felt unappreciated, an outsider, now he feels quite the opposite. Indeed, as his illness deepens, Guibert envisions Elba as his ultimate burial place. More particularly, he imagines his room there transformed into a sort of shrine or "sacristy," in his words, a place where his readers "would be allowed to visit this bare, wretched room, sublime in its ascetic luxury" (111).

In this queer sacred space, designed to accommodate public pilgrimage, Guibert leaves behind a portrait of his own work's life-changing effects, a self-

representation that profoundly changed a French general public, that before him, had known little about the personal face of AIDS. Indeed, Guibert does not just fantasize immortality, he achieves one. But most crucially this immortality is accomplished through an asceticism that uses aesthetics--not morals, not religion or science--as its guiding ethical principle. Foucault described this particular form of aesthetic asceticism through recalling its ancient genealogy: "In antiquity, this work on the self with its attendant austerity is not imposed on the individual by means of civil law or religious obligation, but is a choice about existence made by the individual. People decide for themselves whether to care for themselves" (Rabinow 271).

Moreover, Foucault insists that the kind of immortality that the ascetic-aesthete aspires to is not "to attain eternal life after death" in the Christian sense.

Rather they acted so as to give to their life certain values (reproduce certain examples, leave behind them an exalted reputation, give the maximum possible brilliance to their lives). It was a question of making one's life into an object for a sort of knowledge, for a *tekhne*--for an art. (Rabinow 271)

Guibert does just this, leaving behind a portrait of himself, which, in the tradition of the Manual of

Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, and Michel Foucault's late work, seeks to teach us something about the beauty, the transformative possibilities of hardship and sorrow. In Guibert's case, his self-portrait takes many forms--from writing to video and photographs. Yet the sum effect remains the same. We are taught something about finding aesthetic beauty in what would seem the most unlikely of places. This realization challenges us to transform our own lives accordingly, with or without the presence of illness. Guibert's ability to accept the losses that AIDS exacts reminds us of the beauty in our own corporeal frailty. Further, his asceticism suggests the necessity of self-transformation at every point in life, with or without the presence of hardship, the reversal of fortune.

Chapter Three: Derek Jarman's Two Gardens: classical vs. Christian Asceticism

Try not to guess what lies in the future, but as fortune deals days enter them into your life's book as windfalls

--Derek Jarman *Modern Nature* (106).

Soon after he learned he was HIV-positive, Derek Jarman embarked on what might best be called a performance art project, or a life project (recalling Foucault's term "art of life") in which he left his busy life in London for a cottage located in the small village of Dungeness in Kent, on the southern coast of England. Here Jarman made his retreat on an isolated, constantly windswept and desolate patch of beach or "shingle." Fashioning a new identity as "St. Derek of Dungeness, a hermit in the wilderness of illness," Jarman posed himself the challenge of building a garden out of native plants, flowers and found materials: the flotsam, or trash that continually washes up upon the beach (307). Jarman's tiny Prospect cottage is a simple affair: tongue and groove wood construction, it had sat on its piece of shingle for at least one hundred years. What makes Jarman's move to it remarkable though is the fact that its immediate neighbor is a working nuclear power plant.

The apparently personal and individual act of constructing a garden one stone at a time is thrown into high relief by the presence of the looming nuclear power

plant, which glows, hums and spins day and night. Its construction required that the entire beach be stripped of its soil; this coupled with natural erosion and constant high winds makes building a garden quite a task. Certainly this project of making a garden in such an environmentally damaged, uninhabitable spot was emblematic of Jarman's own precarious state of health. But more crucially, as Jarman understood it, his diagnosis wasn't an individual or isolated experience: his diseased state is the state of "modern nature," shared by all of us.<sup>79</sup>

Jarman's garden building is an act of healing exercised through a returning to the self, for which the garden stands as metaphor. Moreover, his garden building is a performance for an audience, a wide public who is well aware of Jarman's health since he chose to come out publicly as HIV-positive. Jarman's orientation to this audience leads him to document his garden/retreat experience in two texts: a volume of personal journals, *Modern Nature* (1991), and a film, *The Garden* (1992).

In taking such a retreat into what he calls "modern nature," Jarman invokes both pagan and Christian ascetic practice, most specifically the practice of *anachoresis*, which Michel Foucault translates as "the retreat of an

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<sup>79</sup> When asked by a reporter if he didn't mind having a nuclear power station in his backyard, Jarman answered: "But it's yours as well. North Wales found itself the backyard of Chernobyl. At least I can see it" (78).

army, the hiding of an escaped slave from his master, or the retreat into the country away from the towns, as in Marcus Aurelius' country retreat" (TS 34). Foucault describes *anachoresis* as "a spiritual retreat into oneself," where one exercises the *askesis*, or self-discipline, a philosophical program of exercise and training of the self which is enabled and/or accompanied by various related disciplines/practices of self, including strenuous labor (or physical exercise), reading, and dialogue with self and others (facilitated though prayer, correspondence and journal writing). The *askesis*, in other words, "is a general attitude and also a precise act every day" (TS 34).<sup>80</sup>

By placing the practices of the classical philosophical *askesis* within the larger context of a history and genealogy of asceticism, Foucault asserts the classical precursors of modern asceticism which he saw as oft-overlooked in our tendency to assume a primarily Christian outlook in our modern understanding of asceticism. The important work of Foucault's scholarship on asceticism was precisely to place Christian and classical genealogies of asceticism into productive tension. And though Foucault encourages us to see classical and Christian ascetic traditions as

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80 Foucault derived his understanding of the praxis-oriented schools of classical philosophy from Pierre Hadot, whose book *Philosophy as a Way of Life* details the history of spiritual exercises from Socrates to early Christianity. See also Alexander Nehemas' *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*.

overlapping, he sees slight yet important differences in the way they were prescribed and practiced. By illuminating these subtle differences, Foucault affords us a more broad-based critique of ascetic practice in both its historical and contemporary versions. Foucault's goal was to challenge reigning assumptions about our modern subjectivities; Foucault saw the Christian influence as leading us to believe that ascetic practice uncovers some kind of authentic, essential self. His precise interest in classical versions of asceticism rested on his belief that they involved a very different kind of self-formation, one that understood work on the self not as an uncovering or discovering of a preexisting self but rather as creating a self from found materials. Interestingly enough, Derek Jarman displays an incredibly self-reflexive attitude to both the classical and Christian genealogies which intersect at the roots of any modern (including his own) practice of asceticism. Indeed, Jarman constructs a queer genealogy out of both classical and Christian cultural and mythological narratives: the resultant "queered" classical/Christian genealogy forms the aesthetic at the heart of Jarman's asceticism. By "queering" I mean to say that Jarman pits his own brand of radical British queer, nationalist, socialist, aesthetic, political identifications against the interests of the neo-conservative, Thatcherite British cultural status quo, seeking to challenge the

church and state-sponsored versions of classical and Christian culture and mythology which bolster the crumbling ideological foundations of empire. Jarman's mission to uncover what he sees as the radically queer aspects of both classical and Christian history plays a central role in both his art and queer identity. In short, Derek Jarman shows us how a contemporary queer asceticism both appropriates and deconstructs the dominant classical and Christian legacy of asceticism by revealing how both strands resonate within the particularity of his homosexual subjectivity. This effects a deconstruction of dominant notions of asceticism that might best be understood as a queering: a postmodern revisioning of asceticism which refashions the practice by critiquing yet still drawing from both its Stoic-Platonic and Christian origins. Jarman achieves this by presenting us with the text (both literary and filmic) of his garden, the preeminent site of his queer ascesis. Yet to acknowledge the complex and nuanced nature of his queer ascesis, Jarman splits his garden into two, presenting it in two very different lights. In *Modern Nature* (1991), his most ambitious volume of personal journals, Jarman recounts the texture of his daily life in retreat at rural Dungeness as well the experience of his first hospitalization with ARC (for Jarman, it was AIDS-related tuberculosis). Written in primarily private (interior) and mournful tones, the



diary finds a remarkable analogue in the ascetic genre that Michel Foucault called "self-writing," a practice Foucault placed at the heart of both classical and Christian asceticism. In the personal journal that comprises *Modern Nature* Derek Jarman also describes the making of his deeply autobiographical film *The Garden* (1992), a work which presents quite a different garden, a more hyperbolic, stereotypically Christian space where Jarman stages a very public, very queer retelling of Christ's passion (a reading of this film constitutes the next chapter).

Jarman's aestheticization of the garden, the space of his personal practice of asceticism, thus simultaneously signals the public and private dimensions of his asceticism. In both *Modern Nature* and *The Garden* the aesthetic practice of producing journal and film can thus be understood as complexly intertwined with Jarman's practice of asceticism. In both instances, the processes of art making are deeply autobiographical; (indeed, Jarman professed to be uninterested in any other kind of art). In this sense we can surely grasp Foucault's insistence that contemporary asceticism might best be understood as a self-creative activity, or a making of

the self as a work of art, in other words: asceticism as aestheticism.<sup>81</sup>

#### The "Etho-Poetics" of *Modern Nature*

As Derek Jarman recalls first learning of his seroconversion to HIV in *Modern Nature*, his second published volume of journals, it seems his removal from a private place of mourning to eventual transformation to a new "way of life" constituted a gradual process.<sup>82</sup>

When the doctor first told me I was HIV positive, I think she was more upset than me. It didn't sink in at first—that took weeks. I thought: this is not true, then I realised the enormity. I had been pushed into another corner, this time for keeps. It quickly became a way of life. When the sun shone it became unbearable. I didn't say anything, I had decided to be stoic. This was a chance to be grown-up. Though I thought I ought to be crying, I walked down Charing Cross Road in the sunlight, everyone was so blissfully unaware. The sun is still shining. (MN 151-153)

When Jarman says "I had been pushed into another corner, this time for keeps," he casts his HIV status as a deepening of the stigmatized identity that he has

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81 Foucault: "We have hardly any remnant of the idea in our society that the principle work of art which one must take care of, the main area to which one must apply aesthetic values, is oneself, one's life, one's existence" (271).

already known as an out homosexual. Born in 1942, Jarman witnessed the evolving struggle for the recognition of homosexual rights under British law, a movement towards liberty he felt was distinctly reversed during the convergence of Thatcherism and the AIDS epidemic in 1980s Britain.<sup>83</sup> Although Jarman was raised and educated to be a member of the British ruling class, he saw his queerness as a crucial interruption of this trajectory. Most importantly, Jarman sees his queer identity as a protest against the status quo. The "corner" that Jarman professes to be well acquainted with is the homophobic, Tory British establishment against which he positions himself, and more clearly, his self-narrative, his history as queer.

As an artist with a fairly well-known public profile, Derek Jarman most frequently positioned himself *against*. And in this respect he was anything but shy about taking a public stance if an issue was important to him. Indeed, Jarman was well known for his strident critique of hypocrisy wherever he saw it.<sup>84</sup> His disclosure

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82 In his *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia*, Werner Jaeger reminds us of the original (Greek), philosophical (Platonic) meaning of the word conversion: "adopting a philosophy meant a change of life" (10).

83 In the foreword to the second edition of his first volume of journals, *Dancing Ledge*, Jarman writes: "On 22 December 1986, finding I was body positive, I set myself a target: I would disclose my secret and survive Margaret Thatcher."

84 Jarman professed strong distaste with the films produced during the 1980s-era British film "renaissance" (headed by *Chariots of Fire*). He was also fiercely critical of gay artists he felt had capitulated to the establishment: "The pathetic nature of British [gay] life: no Pasolini, Genet, or Barthes, no one here really. Just *Bent* at the National

of his HIV status functioned similarly as he placed his HIV diagnosis into the immediate context of Britain's crumbling health care system, whose demise was being hastened by Margaret Thatcher's (whom Jarman called "the grim reaper") rapid privatization of Britain's social welfare net. In speaking of his illness, Jarman always referred to the political exigency that pervaded his experience of AIDS: "it makes me twice as determined to survive, to find a gap in the prison wall that society has created and jump through it" (232)

It is important to understand Jarman's sense of his homosexual identity as entirely public and political, one formed in distinct opposition to the British establishment. Yet certain qualifications apply. For example, although Jarman had participated in the GLF (Gay Liberation Front) during the early 1970s, and still tended to identify with its Marxist-Socialist inflected politics of sexuality, his identity as artist ultimately played a more dominant role in his homosexual identity. (Nonetheless, Jarman did not see outright conflict between these identities, mixing artistic and political strategy throughout his adult life). This meant that Jarman was equally at home at political demonstrations and meetings as he was in the high art milieu of London.

Moreover, Jarman's fierce sense of his Englishness

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with everyone congratulating themselves...the thespians of Stonewall capitalising on their truly horrid connections with the Establishment" (238).

must be placed in dialogue with his politics. Indeed, at times Jarman can appear quite conservative in his unabashed nationalism.<sup>85</sup> Yet his national identity was hallmarked by complexity and ambivalence.<sup>86</sup> Although Jarman was raised and educated to be a member of the British ruling class, his father was a colonial (and ever sensitive to the stigma that such origination carried), emigrating from New Zealand as a young man. Jarman's mother, an orphaned British colonial subject, was also, thought by Jarman to be partly Jewish. Jarman seized on this well-covered up family secret, even imagining that his father's line carried Maori blood to explain why his thoroughly British schoolmates had called him "wog." (Jarman's Englishness, tainted by his family's colonial past and his own queer present, must best be understood as a hybrid identity).<sup>87</sup> Despite his family's colonial past, their "performance" of English identity definitely carried with it the accoutrements of upper middle class privilege. And while he romanticized the trappings of his privileged boyhood that included living in an ancient

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85 Simon Watney recalls a discussion he had with Jarman just before the artist's death: "though barely alive he could talk only of England's melancholy lack of what he described as a 'dignified' sense of its own cultural history—always greedy for the new, hopelessly and tragically ignorant of its own real achievements and history."

86 Simon Watney has said that "Derek straddled Englishness, from the Knights Templars to the Pet Shop Boys" (2).

87 In *Modern Nature*, Jarman writes: "On my twenty-first birthday my father presented the account, my school report and bills, the cost of an education to make me 'an Englishman'. I had been brought up in the very tradition that had ridiculed its colonials" (265).

manor house and time spent abroad in Italy and Pakistan, Jarman was equally blunt about the deadening ennui that pervaded the conservative cultural wasteland of the 1950s English upper middle class.

Jarman devotes a large part of *Modern Nature* to recounting his autobiography. In this respect, the question of homosexual identity and its formation is central to the narrative of *Modern Nature*. Indeed, the title of this Jarman's second volume of journals alludes to the diary's concern with both Derek Jarman's garden and his homosexual identity, the latter an altogether "modern nature." This title was inspired by a conversation Jarman had with a friend about his move to Dungeness, his project of building a garden there and documenting the process in book form. When his friend said "Oh, you've finally discovered nature, Derek", Jarman demurred, thinking of the traditional artistic paean to the English garden and landscape. ("I don't think it's really quite like that, I said") (8). Amending nature to "modern nature," Jarman insists upon the specificity of his nature, and in doing so invites us to read *Modern Nature* as not solely an account of his garden making but as a narrative of his self-creation as homosexual as well.

*Modern Nature as de-ontological text*

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The critical response to *Modern Nature*, while supportive particularly in its general acknowledgement of Jarman's advanced stage of illness at both the time of the book's creation and publication, shared an almost unanimous frustration with the book's genre—or apparent lack thereof. One anonymous reviewer at *Publishers Weekly* claimed that "the book's fragmentary style sometimes vitiates its power," while *TLS* asserted that "the chaos of his ideas is often mirrored by their realization." (Pickles 19). Another reviewer simply said "too much extraneous stuff" (Mendini).

In claiming that Jarman's published diaries "do not add any new insights to the world he left behind," this last reviewer touches upon another strand that ran through the work's critical reception: a sense that Jarman, in consciously writing *Modern Nature* for publication, somehow failed to reveal enough of himself. "Perhaps, in the end," avers this reviewer, "it was his essence that he did not want revealed." The reviewer at *TLS* supports this charge, claiming that Jarman yields to "a temptation to play to the gallery, and what in a private journal may be a digression of solace here often appears arch, pretentious padding" (Pickles 19).

This argument, summed up in the *TLS* reviewer's comment: "Journals written for public consumption can be very different from those written in a spirit of confessional secrecy," rests upon the modern assumption

that the diary genre necessarily reveals the deep interiority of its author, his or her "insides." On the basis of this criterion, Jarman's *Modern Nature* is judged a failure. However, this assessment is based upon the assumption that Jarman chose to lock himself within the confines of modern genre. However, Jarman was an antiquarian and quite familiar with a vast array of classical and Medieval literature. Moreover, he was an experimentalist aesthetically. In choosing to experiment with the genre of the traditional diary form, Jarman continues the work that he had always done with his films. Yet in choosing this path, as he often lamented, he usually left his critics puzzled, or worse, dissatisfied. Since Jarman saw his art—in all its forms—as a direct expression of his life experience as a gay man,<sup>88</sup> when this happened he would summarily declare that the critics just couldn't fit him into their proper box: "for the 'experts' my sexuality is a confusion". (23)

The assumption that Jarman had somehow come up short in his decision not to write *Modern Nature* "in a spirit of confessional secrecy" misrepresents the history of writing about the self through truncating its genealogy in favor of our modernist prejudices. It does this by assuming that writing about the self first

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88 In *Modern Nature*, Jarman declares: "I cannot watch anything that is not based on the author's life" (102) and of his own artistic process: "Now I just film my life, I'm a happy megalomaniac" (131).



emerged within the conceptual apparatus of confession. Michel Foucault disabused us of this faulty assumption; Foucault makes an important distinction between the way this genre of self-writing functioned in Classical vs. in later, Christian culture:

However personal they may be, these *hupomnemata* ought not to be understood as intimate journals or as accounts of spiritual experience (temptations, struggles, downfalls, and victories) that will be found in later Christian literature. They do not constitute a "narrative of oneself"; they do not have the aim of bringing to the light of day the *arcana conscientiae*, the oral or written confession which has a purificatory value. The movement they seek to bring about is the reverse of that: the intent is not to speak the unspeakable, nor to reveal the hidden, nor to say the unsaid, but on the contrary to capture the already-said, to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self. (210-211)

Acknowledging historical differences in ascetic practice as homologous to different conceptions of ontology, Foucault states: "As there are different forms of care, there are different forms of self" (TS 22). He continues:

The difference between the Stoic and Christian traditions is that in Stoic tradition examination of

self, judgement, and discipline show the way to self-knowledge by superimposing truth about self through memory, that is, by memorizing the rules. In [the Christian practice of] *exmologesis*, the penitent superimposes truth about self by violent rupture and dissociation. It is important to emphasize that this *exmologesis* is not verbal. It is symbolic, ritual, and theatrical. (TS 43).

Foucault's summation here of the differences between pagan and Christian ascetic practices of self emphasizes a contrast between the pagan valuation of the mental aspects of ascesis vs. Christianity's embrace of its more dramatic, corporeal possibilities (which I will claim, in the following chapter, that Jarman's film *The Garden* depicts). This distinction is supported by James A. Francis' study of attitudes toward asceticism in the second-century pagan world. Francis' main claim: "among educated pagans asceticism was purely a matter of education, philosophy, and reason. Any practices not founded on this basis were suspect" (34). According to Francis:

The *Meditations* reveal important evidence regarding asceticism and society in the second century.

Asceticism is seen as a cerebral process of self-discipline. It is not defined primarily in terms of the physical, which Stoicism regards with a decided indifference, but rather in terms of the internal

workings of the mind: motivation, attitude, and emotional response. As a discipline, it requires philosophical education and decorous moderation. It is a matter of 'deportment,' of producing a virtuous man according to the canons of tradition, classical *paideia*. (50)

Foucault's study of the largely pedagogical role that *anachoresis* took within pagan culture ("you retire into the self to discover—but not to discover faults and deep feelings, only to remember rules of actions, the main laws of behavior. It is a mnemotechnical formula") (TS 34) supports Francis' contention that asceticism was equal to educational training in late classical culture: "By the time of Aurelius, Stoicism had become the philosophical justification for *Romanitas* " (52). As we will see, Derek Jarman's own boyhood training to enter the British ruling class makes him particularly familiar with--and critical of--this nationalistic variety of ascesis.

Foucault's sensitivity to the classical precursors of writing about the self plays a key role in grasping Jarman's *Modern Nature*. Although the chaotic structure of the work confused critics who expected a traditional journal or diary format, the heterogeneity of *Modern Nature* ought not to be a charge levied against it. Moreover, the multilayered structure of *Modern Nature* provides clues as to how the work functions in an

aesthetic sense as well as ascetically, as an exercise of self-formation.

*Modern Nature and the classical genre of the hupomnemata*

Although I don't intend to argue that *Modern Nature* neatly fits into one single genre—historical or contemporary, Foucault's description of the classical genre called *hupomnemata* provides us with an excellent guide to reading *Modern Nature*. As Foucault speaks of the *hupomnemata* "in the technical sense, [they] could be account books, public registers, or individual notebooks serving as memory aids" (209). More specifically, Foucault stresses their place within the classical practice of ascesis: "They constitute, rather, a material and a framework for exercises to be carried out frequently: reading, rereading, meditating, conversing with oneself and with others" (210).

Their use as books of life, as guides for conduct, seems to have become a common thing for a whole cultivated public. One wrote down quotes in them, extracts from books, examples, and actions that one had witnessed or read about, reflections or reasonings that one had heard or that had come to mind. They constituted a material record of things read, heard, or thought, thus offering them up as a kind of accumulated treasure for subsequent rereading and meditation. (209)

The process of assembling the *hupomnemata* involved "a selecting of heterogeneous elements" (212).<sup>89</sup> Yet seizing on the apparently fragmentary nature of this genre belies its very practical function; in this sense they cannot be grasped statically, apart from the process of their construction and use. For the goal of the "author" was precisely to unify these "heterogeneous elements" through what Foucault calls "the subjectivication of discourse": or, "to make one's recollection of the fragmentary *logos*, transmitted through teaching, listening, or reading, a means of establishing a relationship with oneself, a relationship as adequate and accomplished as possible" (210-211).

This fashioning of the self from "an equipment of helpful discourses" is thus very much a pedagogical activity (210). Again, Foucault takes pains to stress the heterogeneous nature of this practice. For example, one would not have to restrict oneself to the "truths" or teachings of a particular school. However, the "deliberate heterogeneity" that marks the *hupomnemata* "does not rule out unification" (213). The burden was on the individual to fashion a self through unifying these discourses into knowledge and practice, "not just in the sense that one would be able to recall them to

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89 The *hupomnemata* are more commonly known today in their modern guise as "commonplace books." Susan Miller studies their place in 18th century America in her recent work *Assuming the Positions: Cultural Pedagogy and the Politics of Commonplace Writing*.

consciousness, but that one should be able to use them, whenever the need was felt, in action" (210).

Seneca compares this unification, according to quite traditional metaphors, with the bee's honey gathering, or the digestion of food, or the adding of numbers forming a sum: "We should see to it that whatever we have absorbed should not be allowed to remain unchanged, or it will be no part of us. We must digest it; otherwise it will merely enter the memory and not the reasoning power." (213)

This quote of Seneca's that Foucault calls attention to is instructive, for as Foucault notes: "For us, there is something paradoxical" in the notion that one "could be brought together with oneself through the help of a timeless discourse accepted almost anywhere" (211). Our modern notions of originality jar with antiquity's orientation to authority. However, just as Seneca insists that the individual must "digest" authoritative knowledge, so too does Foucault point out that the *hupomnemata* "is governed by two principles: which one might call 'the local truth of the precept' and its 'circumstantial use value'" (212). In other words, the goal of internalizing precepts was to make them "useful in terms of one's circumstances" (212).

The goal of the *hupomnemata* was thus "to capture the already said, to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the

shaping of the self" (210-211). In other words, through the process of collecting, copying and internalizing—memorizing, "the writer constitutes his own identity though this recollection of things said" (213). Foucault calls this process an "interplay of selected readings and assimilative writing" whose goal is "to form an identity though which a whole spiritual genealogy can be read" (214).

Derek Jarman's *Modern Nature* attempts to do just this--to establish and narrate his own "modern nature" in the form of a queer spiritual genealogy. Jarman calls this process, which is simultaneously intellectual and aesthetic, "an archaeology of the soul," a phrase that appears in several of his writings. (In *Modern Nature*, Jarman writes: "Wisdom is opaque, indistinct, only discovered by an archeology of soul" (193).) <sup>90</sup> Near the beginning of *Modern Nature* Jarman effectively blurs the borders between book, self and garden: he is building a garden (of plants and flowers, of found objects, of verse and personal memory) made from the materials of his own self-mythology:

A personal mythology recurs in my writing, much the same way poppy wreaths have crept into my films. For me this archeology has become obsessive, for the

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<sup>90</sup> In *Kicking the Pricks*, a diary of his film *The Last of England*, Jarman says: "So I scabble in the rubbish...An archaeologist who projects his private world along a beam of light into the arena, till all goes dark at the end of the performance, and we go home (235).

"experts" my sexuality is a confusion. All received information should make us invert sad. But before I finish I intend to celebrate our corner of Paradise, the part of the garden the Lord forgot to mention (23).

Just as the critics were confused by the random structure of *Modern Nature*, where autobiographical narrative is interrupted by collections of quotes from myriad sources (including gardening lore, philosophy, Biblical and historical notation, imaginative scenes in verse and prose), Jarman declares that the "experts" are confused by his sexuality. Moreover, he tells us that "all received information should make us invert sad." Here Jarman indicates his own ambivalent relation to the ascetic process of self-formation that Foucault associates with the *hupomnemata*, or the orientation and formation of the self in relation to the authority of the "already said." But it is crucial to point out that Foucault describes this process of internalization of the *logos* into *ethos* as an appropriation. Jarman would certainly agree: although he warns us that "All received information should make us invert sad," his process of ascetic self-formation involves a creative appropriation of the (official and non-official) myths, narratives and



knowledges that gather dust in the attic of Western culture.<sup>91</sup>

*The Garden as pre and post-lapsarian queer sacred space*

The garden that Jarman builds, his *Modern Nature*, is indeed a queer spiritual genealogy, "the part of the garden the Lord forgot to mention," which Jarman assembles through a process he calls an "archaeology of the soul." Like the Garden of Eden, Jarman's garden is the scene of knowledge about a self that was forbidden (by his parents, schoolmasters and culture at large); at the same time it is about knowledge more broadly—the classical knowledge that Christian culture sought to control, the alternative knowledges that sprang up within Christian cultures only to be labeled heresy and burned. Jarman plays at archaeologist, unearthing these fragments of buried history to place them in a new formation, a queer mosaic. Jarman intends to leave his own art behind so that others may be enabled to perform an "archaeology of the soul" in turn:

to whom it may concern/ in the dead stones of a planet/  
no longer remembered as earth/ may he decipher this  
opaque hieroglyph/ perform an archeology of the soul/ on  
these precious fragments/ all that remains of our  
vanished days/ here-at the sea's edge/ I have planted a

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<sup>91</sup> In the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault calls this appropriation of hegemonic discourse an act of "counter discourse," associating this strategy with the

stony garden/ dragon tooth dolmen spring up/ to defend  
the porch/ steadfast warriors. (16)

In the notes to an art exhibition, Jarman wrote:  
"disrupting period ensures a continuing contemporaneity"  
(qtd. in Pinfold 82). With disrupting the politics of  
seamless cultural narratives as his distinct goal,  
Jarman's metaphors and references often appear jumbled  
and playful; he does not seek to write an academic,  
authoritative version of queer history. Instead, Jarman  
lets a camp aesthetic guide his recreation of an  
altogether unofficial version of classical and Christian  
mythological narrative.<sup>92</sup>

In putting together *Modern Nature*, Jarman refuses  
to conform to intellectual dicta that would fiercely  
police the boundaries between aesthetic and scholarly  
styles, yet the work is nonetheless scholarly. Jarman is  
very much a queer humanist—steeped in learning all his  
life, which the book reveals in the multitude of  
references he makes. Moreover, *Modern Nature* documents  
his daily intellectual and artistic process, which yields  
art made through piecing together the historical and  
cultural detritus of Western civilization. Simon Watney  
has lovingly critiqued Jarman as "always (sometimes  
touchingly) committed to the idea of a grand

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emergence of homosexual identity.

<sup>92</sup> Jarman's sense of humor is visible in the titles of paintings he describes making in *Modern Nature*: "The lady who hung herself in the Garden of Eden, The boy who drowned in holy water, A day-return to the Isle of the Dead" (52).

transhistorical sequence of homosexuals, from Plato onward by way of Michelangelo, Wilde, and so on" ("A Political Death"). Watney also called Jarman "an erudite antiquarian."

*"Garden Time": Jarman's asceticism*

As he records in *Modern Nature*, throughout any given day Jarman moves from writing to reading to painting and gardening. The rhythms of his artistic and intellectual process are choppy, reflecting the restlessness that is a product of Jarman's illness and occasional discomfort at being so alone:

I tried to warm myself, bustled around, tended the fires; but sadness hangs around me like these short and sunless days. The virus has displaced me—a refugee in my own conscience. I wander aimlessly. A picture, a note to myself, a chapter of a book half-understood, a song. The news—forgotten before the weather forecast. (211)

Jarman is not always comfortable on retreat. He can be nervous, wants at times to escape to London (and does so regularly), but he claims that he has nonetheless "re-discovered my boredom here" as he admits that HIV has dramatically changed the fabric of his life (32). ("My whole being has changed; my wild nights on the vodka are now only an aggravating memory, an itch before turning in") (25). In stimulating his memory of the past, integral to the work that he does in his "archaeology of

the soul," Jarman often experiences emotional distress. This coupled with his illness only deepens his physical and emotional restlessness. Jarman carefully records these states: "I'm awake—the sun has not risen. The view from my window is bathed in a ghostly grey light, the sea white as milk. I try to get back to sleep, but questions, like the demons that guard sleep, crowd into my mind" (56).

Yet intersecting it all--the restless states, periods of illness, personal recollections and copying of quotes from sources, Jarman interjects sublime descriptions of the landscape which surrounds him, and these operate almost magically to palliate and still his sadness and suffering.

Rain streaking the windows throws the landscape out of focus, brings sparkling colour to my standing stones. The crocuses close as tight as umbrellas; the borage is spangled with raindrops and blue stars. Grape hyacinths nestle in the flints, and the first golden wallflower breaks into bloom. (30-31)

These descriptions represent what Jarman calls "garden time." This is the time and the place that Jarman has come to Dungeness to inhabit. As meditation, "garden time" exercises a healing effect on Jarman's ill state. "Garden time" also invites Jarman, who is prone to anxiety and restlessness, into a trance-like creative state in which he is able to access fragments of memory:

The gardener digs in another time, without past or future, beginning or end. A time that does not cleave the day with rush hours, lunch breaks, the last bus home. As you walk in the garden you pass into this time-the moment of entering can never be remembered. Around you the landscape lies transfigured. Here is the Amen beyond prayer (30).

Because "the moment of entering [garden time] can never be remembered," an important part of Derek Jarman's ascesis in *Modern Nature* is to stimulate and record memories. Like the *hupomnemata* then, Jarman's *Modern Nature* serves a mnemonic function. But it does so complexly. Jarman calls his garden "a memorial" and it's clear that he uses the exercise of garden building as an exercise in self-recollection, a returning to the self gained through a remembering and documentation of one's self-history. But the garden is also a memorial to friends who are dying and have died of AIDS. Jarman reiterates this memorial aspect in verse upon verse, including the following poem:

Old friends died young/ The virus attacks creation/  
Creativity withers/ No consuming passions/ Only  
these slow melancholy days/ The garden is built for  
dear friends/ Howard, Paul, Terence, David, Robert,  
and Ken/ And so many others, each stone has a life  
to tell/ I cannot invite you into this house. (178)

"Do this in Memory of Me": the Garden as Memorial<sup>93</sup>

Throughout *Modern Nature* Jarman repetitively lists their names: "Nick, Robert, Terry, Howard, David" (105). So though Jarman calls himself "St. Derek of Dungeness, a hermit in the wilderness of illness," he is not alone (307). Buffeted by the endless winds of Dungeness, these winds also carry the voices of his dead and dying friends. ("I walk in this garden/ Holding the hands of dead friends") (69). Thus Jarman constructs his garden as a queer spiritual genealogy of self and others, of a community which the AIDS epidemic was wiping out, leaving no apparent trace:

Could I face the dawn cheerfully, paralysed by the virus that circles like a deadly cobra? So many friends dead or dying—since Autumn: Terry, Robert, David, Ken, Paul, Howard. All the brightest and best trampled to death—surely even the Great War brought no more loss into one life in just twelve months, and all this as we made love not war. (56)

Jarman uses *Modern Nature* to tell the story of his "forgotten generation," which is also his story. In this sense, he sees no separation from, but rather commonality with the sexual and political comrades who are falling

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93 I am indebted to my committee member, the Rev. Dr. Alan Gregory for explaining the concept of *anamnesis* to me. Gregory pointed out to me that this is an important function of Jarman's asceticism. *Anamnesis*, which can be understood by the phrase "do this in memory of me," places the burdens of memory on the present, on those who reenact it as a sacred, memorializing act.

all around him. ("Our name will be forgotten in time/ And no one will remember our works/ Our life will pass away like the traces of a cloud") (109). Moreover, Jarman sees the pressing necessity of recording the story of his generation, the generation that had lived ecstatic lives as pioneers of the sexual revolution only to be wiped out ten years later. Jarman decries "[t]he terrible dearth of information" on his peers' experience of battling AIDS: "the fictionalisation of our experience, there is hardly any gay autobiography, just novels, but why novelise it when the best of it is in our lives?" (56).

Yet the process of witnessing and recording memory takes its toll: "I am wandering aimlessly in this labyrinth of memories. Paul's death left me numb. Most registered zero on the Richter scale of emotion" (169). In moments of despair, Jarman asks himself: "What purpose had my book? Was I a fugitive from my past? Had I condemned myself to prison here? How could I celebrate my sexuality filled with so much sadness, and frustration for what has been lost?" (56). Encroaching sadness threatens to immobilize him: "I find myself unable to record the disaster that has befallen some of my friends" (179). Yet his desire to celebrate and memorialize his generation keeps him moving forward. When Jarman is hospitalized during his first bout with an AIDS related illness, he is forced to dictate his daily journal to a

friend. "I find it difficult to write each day," Jarman admits, "but if I don't I'm swamped with guilt" (77).

Just as "[t]he terrible dearth of information" motivates Jarman to tell his story, so too does his wish to counter the distortions that circulate during the epidemic:

As I sweat it out in the early hours, a "guilty victim" of the scourge, I want to bear witness to how happy I am, and will be until the day I die, that I was part of the hated sexual revolution; and that I don't regret a single step or encounter I made in that time; and if I write in future with regret, it will be a reflection of a temporary indisposition. (149)

*Queer pleasure: against Christian asceticism*

The emphasis that Jarman places on celebrating his sexuality in the face of AIDS signals his deep distrust of the anti-sexual asceticism that had descended upon him as a young boy, sexual repressiveness being a cornerstone of the British ruling class *paideia*. By declaring that his goal in *Modern Nature* is to "celebrate our corner of Paradise, the part of the garden the Lord forgot to mention," Jarman distinguishes his own practice of homosexual asceticism from the repressive type promulgated by Christianity (23). Indeed, Jarman describes the garden



of his childhood and young adult memory as a prelapsarian garden, a space of erotic freedom. Counter to this space was the dreary militarism of his father's Royal Air Force career, the sexual repression of boarding school, and finally, the AIDS virus and 1980s Tory Britain: as Jarman writes: "the barbed wire that had hemmed me in, quite literally, in the RAF camps-the fenced-in boarding school, the proscribed sexuality, the virus" (167).

To celebrate his lost garden, Jarman writes in protest to the violent repressiveness of Christianity. In contrast, he imagines his own garden as a truly pagan, queer space, one that he celebrates a queer spiritual genealogy. When Jarman envisions this garden, it is inevitably a thoroughly theatrical, even camp scene: I dreamt of a grand procession, like the Parthenon frieze, of naked young men with wands and torches, trumpets and banners, a triumph over death for dear Howard, figures draped in diaphanous silks with golden crowns and oiled torsos, naked youths on elephants, leading white oxen with gilded horns bearing all the heroes of history, Alexander, Hadrian, Michaelangelo, Whitman... (75)

To celebrate this prelapsarian garden in *Modern Nature*, Jarman must unearth its buried memory: "I sit with my eyes shut, trying to dispel the mists of nearly forty years, to recall my little garden, a garden that won me a prize of five shillings. But try as I may it is only a dim memory" (43). Although Jarman had gardened as

a young child, when he left home for London as a young man he left his gardening tools behind, only to find them in his father's house after the elder Jarman died. As Jarman returns to early memory he tells us: "Flowers spring up and entwine themselves like bindweed along the footpaths of my childhood" (7).

Jarman's early childhood was a "happy garden state" (38), a period suffused with "garden time": "These spring flowers are my first memory, startling discoveries; they shimmered briefly before dying, dividing the enchantment into days and months, like the gong that summoned us to lunch, breaking up my solitude" (7). In keeping with his romanticization of classical culture and history, Jarman's very first memories are of Italy, where his father was stationed at the end of World War Two. Here Jarman's family lived in a requisitioned palace bordering a lake with extensive gardens.

Here Jarman also remembers his "first love," Davide who "would place me on the handlebars of his bike and we'd be off down country lanes-or out on to the lake in an old rowing boat, where I would watch him strip in the heat as he rowed round the headland to a secret cove, laughing all the way" (11). In keeping with this dawning of homosexual eros, to these very same gardens Jarman would return as a young gay man, living at the height of the sexual revolution: "Years later, in 1972, I returned to the Borghese Gardens with a soldier I met in the

Cinema Olympia. He had thrown his arms around me in the gods; later we made love under the stars of my Eden" (14).<sup>94</sup>

More often than not though, Jarman describes his childhood self as alone: "The gong brought the pressing necessity of that other world into the garden where I was alone. In that precious time I would stand and watch the garden grow, something imperceptible to my friends" (7). School comes as an evil necessity, a "Paradise Perverted" that would disrupt his "happy garden state" and interrupt "garden time" (58): "the seven days of the week were now mapped out by bells-and lessons" (14). Moreover, Jarman represents school as the vehicle of a repressive Christian cultural training: "St. Juliana's convent ran a day school for children, whither I was sent at the age of five to be roasted with threats of hellfire" (22). Jarman calls the nuns there "intimidating automata, brides of a celibate God," these perpetrators "hacked my paradise to pieces like the despoilers of the Amazon—carving paths of good and evil to Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory" (22). Four years later, Jarman is sent to boarding school. To escape the boredom tinged with violence, Jarman disappears (with

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<sup>94</sup> Jarman juxtaposes this memory with that of an earlier trip he had taken to Greece at the time just before he came out: "years ago on the island of Patmos, the old woman on whose roof I was sleeping washed my clothes for me, and scented them with wild rosemary from the hillside. In ancient Greece young men wore garlands of rosemary in their hair to stimulate the mind; perhaps the gathering of the Symposium was scented with it" (9).

an imaginary friend) "to my secret garden—the first of many that blossomed in my dreams":

It was here that I brought him, sworn to secrecy, and then watched him slip out of his grey flannel suit and lie naked in the spring sunlight. Here our hands first touched; then I pulled down my trousers and lay beside him. Bliss that he turned and lay naked on his stomach, laughing as my hand ran down his back and disappeared into the warm darkness between his thighs. (38)

Jarman's imagined memory blurs into real memory as he tells of his first close school chum, who used to climb into Jarman's bed on cold nights. An angry schoolmaster put a stop to this, accusing them of masturbation:

Then the blows rained down, millenia of frustrated Christian hatred behind the cane. What a terrible God to take on the hurt and then hurt us all! That day a childhood idyll died in the bells and the sermons, the threats to tell our parents and derision; and we were shoved into the wilderness they had created, and commanded to punish ourselves for all time. So that at last we would be able to enter their heaven truly dead in spirit. (50)

*Ascetic text as social protest*

In *Modern Nature* Jarman protests the persecution that took place under the aegis of Christian ethical and

moral law in much the same fashion that Michel Foucault used classical ethical and philosophical texts to counter our primarily Christian assumptions about modern asceticism. Although Foucault defended himself from accusations that he posited classical culture as a sort of "golden age" for us to aspire to,<sup>95</sup> Jarman makes no such apologies. Indeed, in *Modern Nature* Jarman's writings contra Christianity take on a hyperbolic, performative aspect, which he would literalize in his film *The Garden*. In these fantasies, Jarman quite literally "fucks" with Christian narrative and myth, mixing the agit-prop aesthetic strategies of his GLF days with the more camp-styled, artistically savvy antics of the ACT-UP/Queer Nation inspired AIDS activist group OUT RAGE that Jarman was a member of. In the following example, Jarman writes in this fashion to protest the sexual repression of his British boarding school, which was doled out in the ideology of a "muscular Christianity":

But I knew the joy of heaven was there, the splendor and nobility of warriors, and I vowed to revenge my generations, to shred the false white veil of holy matrimony and fuck the haughty Groom, and to wipe up

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<sup>95</sup> Although Foucault saw important differences between classical and Christian conceptions of sexual ethics, he would say of the former: "The Greek ethics of pleasure is linked to a virile society, to dissymmetry, exclusion of the other, an obsession with penetration, and a kind of threat of being dispossessed of your own energy, and so on. All that is quite disgusting!" (258).

his come with the Savior's shroud. Then our task completed on earth we would enter the Kingdom, a band of warriors and gang-bang the Trinity on its throne of gold before a multitude of saints, until this Christ repented and confessed his true love of Saint John. Now and forever Amen. (50-51)

This "band of warriors" who would "gang-bang the Trinity on its throne" are of course Jarman's fellow AIDS activists, the OUT RAGE members who share Jarman's penchant for noisy, public disruption and demonstration. But even more widely, they are his whole community of queer friends and lovers. [Footnote making of Garden by same group-collective] (Jarman always worked to blur the latter distinctions, which he associated with the institutions of heterosexuality). They are the inheritors of a queer spiritual genealogy that he envisions as an "army of lovers" (as Plato writes of in *The Symposium*). But just as Michel Foucault refuses to take the easy route of demonizing Christianity in his history of sexual ethics, Jarman also chooses to include Jesus and his apostles in his (very masculine) vision of a queer spiritual genealogy of queer brethren. (As Jarman writes in one of his poems: "Matthew fucked Mark fucked Luke fucked John") (69). When he recounts attending the London gay pride march in *Modern Nature*, he addresses the following missive to the Lord:

Dear Jesus, innocent begetter of an evil and corrupt tradition, we know you would join this march, our entry into Jerusalem, would kiss John and consign the born again to the bottomless pit, or rather enlighten them and out them to bed with their brothers and sisters. For we know the castle of Heterosex has its walls of tears and dungeons of sadness. We can laugh at the house of cards called the Family. We demand one right: "equality of loving before the law" and the end of our banishment from the daylight. (102)

Although Jarman queers Christianity with abandon, he most closely associates queer eros with classical myth and narrative. ("Waking from the strangest dream. A conversation on a red bus with a naked youth who declared he was the god Dionysus on his way to attend an orgy in his honour") (235). For Jarman, classical culture represents a return to the homosexual eros that Christianity had stolen from him in his boyhood. This return to an unabashed, uninhibited sexuality, moreover, reached its peak for Jarman during the heady days of the 1970s. Jarman associates the orgies, drugs and endless celebrations of the era with the (much derided) hedonism of ancient Rome and Greece. Describing an afternoon of intense sex with the star of his first film, *Sebastiane*, Jarman writes: "fucking Ken...we rode back into an antiquity of fable, not an Eden but a Paradois Paradise

and we were Alexander and Hadrian and every boy since  
then, power, conquest, surrender, my paradise was whole"  
(qtd. in Peake 219).<sup>96</sup>

*Asceticism as syncretism*

In *Modern Nature*, Derek Jarman ultimately presents his homosexual ascesis as a practice whose goal is the production of a truly syncretic queer spiritual genealogy. Jarman represents this genealogy most clearly through his collection and arrangement of the folk knowledges that comprise gardening/herbal lore. These voices blend the classical and Christian, the official and unofficial voice, to present a compendium of the healing properties of plants and flowers. Jarman explores this healing history without prejudice to his sources--all of them were seen in their time as offering a possible cure. Moreover, these remedies represent a fusion of official knowledges--the scholarly and academic writings on herbs and plants from the classical and Medieval periods (from Pliny to Gerard's Herbal) and the

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<sup>96</sup> Jarman's engagement of classical myth and literature to articulate a masculine queer spiritual genealogy springs from a tradition within the educated middle and upper classes in Britain. In *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford*, Linda Dowling tracks the classical curriculum at 18-19th century Oxford, demonstrating how Hellenism was used to negotiate and articulate versions of masculine nationality, and subsequently, sexuality. Not surprisingly, the initial state-sponsored version of classical history stressed its martial culture, employing classical culture as a masculine ideal for the British Empire. Yet as Dowling sees it, the popularity of the classics in the curriculum also allowed for the emergence of a homosexual British identity that would interrogate the contours of hegemonic masculinity, transforming martial metaphors into erotic ones.



folk knowledges—the alchemical and magical texts that Jarman steeped himself in.

Musing on the medicinal properties of rosemary, Jarman uncovers a mythological history of the herb that runs the gamut from Thomas More, Ophelia and the Virgin Mary (who “laid out her robe to dry on some bushes, coloring them a heavenly blue”) (9). Then we are told that rosemary, “the herb sacred to remembrance,” also plays a role in Jarman’s own self-mythology, as “years ago on the island of Patmos, the old woman on whose roof I was sleeping washed my clothes for me, and scented them with wild rosemary from the hillside.” From this memory Jarman reminds us that “[i]n ancient Greece young men wore garlands of rosemary in their hair to stimulate the mind”; finally, Jarman muses: “perhaps the gathering of the Symposium was scented with it” (9).

Jarman tells us that he came to Dungeness after learning he was HIV positive in order to make a healing garden: “I plant my herbal garden as a panacea, read up on all the aches and pains that plants will cure—and know they are not going to help” (179). Yet straightaway he tells us: “The garden as pharmacopoeia has failed” (179). (“Yet there is a thrill in watching the plants spring up that gives me hope”).

Jarman’s plaintive declaration underlines the reality of his situation. At the time of his illness the

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only drugs available to treat AIDS were equally as poisonous as they were palliative. As his illness deepens and begins to hem him in, Jarman's tone in *Modern Nature* darkens, becomes tinged with sadness. At this point in the journal, Jarman moves from "garden time" into illness time, which begins with constant night sweats. ("For ten days I've been in a feverish sweat, wet T-shirts all over the floor. I faithfully swallowed my antibiotics at two in the morning, but my temperature stayed at 102 for five days") (250). Jarman takes his pills, but to no avail, the "pharmacopoeia has failed." The night sweats interrupt his sleep, disorienting his days: "I sit here wondering how to pass the day—hard to find the concentration necessary for reading. In the end I resolved it by falling asleep until one" (252). Jarman's daily discipline—his work in the garden, on his art, even his reading—is upset. His one thought: "is it HIV-related or just a bloody infection?" (251).<sup>97</sup>

Jarman's documentation of his illness time intensifies; his fever and night sweats not having abated, he is forced to enter the hospital for tests, treatment and close observation. Jarman the fighter, the angry voiced denouncer of hypocrisy retires from view at this point. His illness truly overtaking him, he declares, "I feel I have lost control" (251) and admits

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97 Jarman's fear stems from the fact that he has not yet been diagnosed with AIDS, which follows confirmation of an AIDS-related complex (ARC).

his feelings that he "out of sync" (270). Indeed, rather than protest, Jarman accepts his fate and embraces the care offered by the hospital and its kind staff. Jarman is overwhelmed with visits from friends and family, but his struggles with the illness do not cease as the doctors attempt to find out what's wrong with him.

In the more reassuring atmosphere of the hospital, Jarman resumes his own brand of self-diagnosis as he continues practicing his ascesis--the "archaeology of the soul." The effect that his worsening illness has had on his emotional state intensifies this process, yet Jarman declares: "I see the past more clearly. Before all of this had been suppressed, no memory at all" (262). Indeed, Jarman decides that his illness is the product of his uncovering of traumatic memory:

The doctors laugh when I say this illness is psychosomatic, but I'm certain the letter from [Aunt] Moyra was the trigger for all this. She revealed Dad's extremely violent behavior: force-feeding me at four--screaming, shouting, thumping me, and even once throwing me out the window. (262)

As his days and nights blur with constant fever and a barrage of medications feeds his disorientation, Jarman begins to delve deeper into his past which his dream-like state brings him closer to: "I lay in a trance, and images flowed through my mind: leopards, waves, stars. I thought I could get in touch with my mother, so I talked

to her. It must have to go a long way, I haven't met up yet. I remembered her very beautiful face in all the stages of her life" (270). Though he suffers, he acknowledges the self-growth that accompanies the disease: "I have explored my body and have become acquainted with it for the first time in my life. I have learnt to relax every muscle so that nothing is stressful" (260).

While outside the hospital's walls London boils into the "chaos" and "mayhem" of the poll tax riots, Jarman's illness (and the drugs used to treat it) ushers him into a state beyond words.<sup>98</sup>

Waves of icy sulpadiazine breaking on the farther shores after we have crossed over in a blizzard of pills, a rainbow-colored confetti of serpent poisons, sharp-toothed as the adder. Words, no longer strung out on the lines of narrative, escape and hang round corners waiting to jump out of the dictionary, restore primal disorder. (307)

During one of his sleepless nights, Jarman experiences a kind of epiphany that characterizes his mellow state:

As I lay here I heard someone singing a deep, quiet, comforting song, it came and went like a will o' the

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<sup>98</sup> Of the poll tax, Jarman writes: "I can afford this, but what about my neighbors? Most of them are already hard-pressed. It's a total mess. It would take a rat as blind as Mrs. T. to dream it up. I vow to see her out come what may" (253).

wisp. I called the nurse and asked her who was singing. 'Mildred the cleaning lady.' So, drenched with sweat, I opened the curtains a fraction to hear better. When she passed by I called out to her and she came in; I said 'Your song is wonderful' and she smiled. She said the spiritual was called *Spirit of the Living God*; she placed her hands on me and very quietly, with a voice of great beauty, sung to me. It was the most moving moment, I couldn't hold back the tears. She smiled, blessed me and carried on with her round. (267)

Soon after this evening, Jarman's doctors uncover the source of his infection: he is harboring TB that has been reactivated due to his compromised immune system. Jarman is treated, and responds fairly rapidly. ("I could hardly wait for the first pills to bomb the TB, imagining comic-strip warfare—Zap, Biff, Crash, Splat") (272). Jarman looks forward to returning to his garden, whose summer plantings he has planned "in detail" (273). Although one of the risks of the medication Jarman is being treated with is loss of sight, he feels as though he has been given a new lease on life:

Plans, plans, so many plans: everything is going to change—clear the flat, send papers to the National Film Archive. Give paintings to AIDS charities, rearrange Prospect's bookshelves. Clear Phoenix House entirely—get rid of everything, no more

clutter, start painting, get *Edward II* underway.

Plant the garden (275)

As *Modern Nature* concludes, the reader is forced to read between the lines of Jarman's optimism, to face the reality of his situation: with the onset of blindness, the ascetic practice of self-writing that spurred the creation of *Modern Nature* becomes increasingly untenable for Jarman. The journal ends on this sad note—indeed, the tone of Jarman's sadness is not interrupted as he watches his health deteriorate even further. In this sense, Jarman's asceticism (and his expression of it in *Modern Nature*) becomes quite private and mournful. Yet Jarman's asceticism does not end here.

In the chapter's next section I will look at Jarman's film *The Garden* (which he made just prior to his first hospitalization as recounted above). I will argue that this is Jarman's public expression par excellence of his asceticism. Set in his garden, the film draws on elements that are present (and actually frame) *Modern Nature*; the film is deeply autobiographical yet transposed to an even more explicitly public level, as it enacts (what has been called the most public of Christian narratives) the story of Christ's passion. I will argue that the film survives as Jarman's final public expression of his asceticism. To grasp Jarman's asceticism fully, *Modern Nature* can only be read as a companion text to his film *The Garden*. Together, these

two texts portray Jarman's asceticism in its fullest sense, as both a public and private activity.

#### Chapter 4: Performing Asceticism in Derek Jarman's *The Garden*

"What is the politically correct response to this work? 'I don't think anyone knows,' Jarman says, knowingly. 'You make a film like *The Garden*, for instance, people will react in the way that they react because you leave it open.'"<sup>99</sup>

Derek Jarman recounts the creation of his 1991 film *The Garden* in his second volume of personal journals, *Modern Nature*. Situating the film within the narrative fabric of his daily life, Jarman acquaints the reader of *Modern Nature* with the most intimate details of the making of *The Garden*, fashioning him or her into an ideal viewer for the film. Furthermore, just as he does in *Modern Nature*, Jarman uses *The Garden* to present his viewers with a pedagogical model of his personal practice of asceticism.<sup>100</sup> In this section of my chapter on Jarman, I will read *The Garden* alongside of *Modern Nature* (insisting that the texts are companions, and ultimately inextricable), in order to discern and discuss the distinctive version of asceticism that Jarman presents us in his film, *The Garden*.

In *Modern Nature* Jarman's practice of asceticism takes a private cast, centering on the individual activities of journal writing and garden building, both of which cultivate what Jarman calls "an archaeology of the soul"; however in *The Garden*, Jarman's asceticism

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99 Bennett, Catherine. "Lesson of the Gay Guru." *The Guardian* (London) April 9, 1992.

100 I am indebted to my dissertation group for this idea.



emerges in a more explicitly public and political garb. Rather than focusing entirely on depicting his personal experience, the film places Jarman on the margins (however instrumentally) of a very spectacular retelling and reenactment of the Passion narrative, that "most public"<sup>101</sup> and popular of Christian stories, which itself condenses a long history of ascetic practice, aesthetics and ideology.<sup>102</sup> Most crucially, in *The Garden*, Derek Jarman uses the Passion narrative as a vehicle for telling a contemporary story about AIDS, homophobia and the redemptive properties of queer love; in doing so, Jarman stages a powerful queer intervention into the dominant Christian ideology of asceticism.<sup>103</sup>

Always attentive to the filmic properties of the literary and the aesthetic, Jarman's distinctive brand of interdisciplinary filmmaking (he received degrees in both literature and painting respectively before coming to film) makes the Passion narrative an ideal vehicle for his use. Indeed, historical studies of the Passion

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101 In the preface to his two volume commentary on the Passion Narrative as it appears in the four gospels, Raymond E. Brown claims: "Historically, Jesus' death was the most public moment of his life as figures known from Jewish or secular history (Caiaphas, Annas, Pilate) crossed his path" (vii). *The Death of the Messiah: from Gethsemane to the Grave*. NY: Doubleday, 1994.

102 From the Medieval period to the 19th century, the Passion narrative enjoyed an unparalleled iconic popularity in the West, finding expression in all of the arts: the visual (painting, sculpture); literary (devotional-meditational texts) and performative (dramatic and liturgical acts).

narrative stress the complex interrelationship between the various media that have been used to present it. Whether reading, singing or reciting the Passion individually or in groups, seeing it performed in a popular play or high mass, or regarding its depiction in plastic, visual form, an individual at any particular historical moment throughout the period of the Passion's popularity would be more than likely to draw upon all of these experiences in his or her use, consumption and understanding of the narrative.<sup>104</sup> As Thomas Bestul points out in his study of the Passion narrative's central place within medieval Latin devotional literature, *Texts of the Passion*: "These varied texts are always to be regarded as in continual and dynamic interrelationship throughout the centuries" (1). Furthermore, the narrative sequences of the Passion have been used in non-linear fashion since as early as the medieval period, making the Passion an extraordinarily apt vehicle for the kind of queer, postmodern work Jarman sought to do.

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103 This intervention might be called "when gardens collide" as Jarman confronts the Christian ideological use of the gardens of Eden and Gethsemane by resituating them within the space of his own, very queer garden.

104 In his study of devotional texts that represent the Passion, Thomas Bestul argues that the narrative "enjoyed a continuous popularity, both in Latin and in the vernaculars, from the early Middle Ages until at least the nineteenth century" (6). Bestul, Thomas H. *Texts of the Passion: Latin Devotional Literature and Medieval Society*. Philadelphia: UP Press, 1996.

In sum, *The Garden* portrays a queer retelling of Christ's Passion; However, in *The Garden* the Christ figure is made interchangeable with a pair of gay lovers. Furthermore, in this film Christ is relegated to the marginal role of witness and observer, while the gay lovers are placed at the center of the Passion story. They suffer as Christ watches, an aloof if empathic Christ.<sup>105</sup>

But the film is not simply a Passion story. Jarman's passion actually begins with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden (by a leather clad, pierced and monocled Satan clutching a rather large black dildo); this scene immediately signals the specific setting of Jarman's own garden, that prelapsarian space of queer eros, so familiar to the reader of *Modern Nature*. Thus the film is very much a tale of Jarman's own garden (the film's obvious setting), the space of Jarman's solitude, suffering and solace. Yet the garden in the film is alternatively a very social and public space, filled with Jarman's friends and lovers who play themselves playing the various figures of the Passion, in something "like a school Bible pageant hijacked by Pasolini" (Kennedy 35).<sup>106</sup>

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105 Interestingly enough, the substitution of the gay lovers for Christ's traditional role at the center of the Passion was apparently just a happy accident in *The Garden* : the actor Jarman originally engaged to play Christ withdrew at the last minute from the film because he feared to offend his Jehovah's witness parents; although Jarman eventually found a Christ replacement, he decided to focus his story on the two lovers.

106 Kennedy, Harlan. "The Two Gardens of Derek Jarman." *Film Comment*. Nov.-Dec. 1993. V29.N6. (28-35).

Indeed, the self-reflexive nature of the film reveals its improvisational and very communal construction. As is clear in *Modern Nature*, Jarman makes his films by gathering old and new friends around him in a chaotic and creative soup. Rather than work from a script, Jarman provides his ensemble cast with elaborate costumes, unusual props, music and some very basic narrative guidelines. Pulling away from narrative, Jarman would rather create what he calls "emblemata." His cinematic mode appears most analogous to the *tableaux vivant*, whose history itself comprises both the visual and dramatic arts. As one critic put it: *The Garden* "uses old friends, super-8 and video, to turn cinematography into painting-by-celluloid" (Kennedy 34).

*The Garden* sprang first and foremost from its eponymous site: Jarman's garden at Dungeness. Quoting from Jarman's unpublished personal papers, his biographer reveals the artist's desire to present "the landscape as a protagonist." (412). Working with "the symbol of the garden" in its most elastic sense (incorporating personal, biblical and historical allusions), Jarman sought to present the garden as "indissolubly linked to who we are and who we might be," to claim, moreover, that "if the landscape is destroyed we will destroy ourselves" (qtd. in Peake 412).

Of course Jarman's sense of moral-environmental exigency here is colored by his deepening experience of

illness from AIDS. As the pages of *Modern Nature* attest, by the time Jarman initiates the film he is suffering from debilitating night sweats, nausea and an increasing sense of malaise. When the filming actually begins, he cannot even hold a camera: "My hand shakes too much" (141).

Thus Jarman's film emerges from within his personal experience of AIDS, which had deeply colored his vision of the surrounding landscape.<sup>107</sup> Suffering his illness amidst the wild and dominating landscape of Dungeness, he sees and feels the tragic effects of global warming as a growing environmental crisis for which AIDS is ominously symptomatic. In this tragic and foreshortened life state his perception is quite literally intensified: "Looking at the Ness through sick eyes I notice the burnt-out broom, the foxgloves that have disappeared, the stunted poppies in the bright dry sunlight. Even the shallows, burnt black by the gales, rattle like dead bones" (MN 288). Gifted with this vision, Jarman pictures himself as a sort of seer and prophet. From this place grows *The Garden*, which he originally constructs as a dream allegory and visionary text both.

As I walked along the beach I thought the film might follow the sound of footsteps, a journey with the continuous murmur of lazy waves, sea breezes,

thunder, and stormy growlers. In the swell: dreams and recollections, the gemstone city of *Revelations*, brazen trumpets, the *Song of Solomon*—could all this be resolved with the *Tao Te Ching: great fullness seems empty?* (89)

Befitting his literary bent, for inspiration Jarman looks not only to the landscape surrounding him but also to literature: in the quote above, the Bible and the *Tao Te Ching*. In its earliest incarnation, Jarman referred to the film as "The Wanderer" and "The Dream of the Rood," revealing the film's roots in the literary genre of the dream allegory (Peake 443).<sup>108</sup> As Jarman's biographer puts it: "as the film's maker, Jarman himself would dream his film into being" (Peake 445)

And indeed, the film begins with Jarman quite literally dreaming (and writing) the film's narrative into motion. Sprawled out upon his desk inside his cottage at Dungeness, Jarman has fallen asleep over the open pages of a large book: his own journal, as becomes evident later in the film where scenes of Jarman writing in his journal punctuate the otherwise random narrative sequencing. Situated just above his head looms an imposing, freestanding crucifix, which cries miraculous

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107 Indeed before deciding upon the final title *The Garden*, Jarman referred to his incipient project as "Borrowed Time" alluding to the impact of AIDS upon his and others' lives.

tears that splash in tortuous fashion onto Jarman. At this moment the relationship between Jarman and Christ's passion is first established; The proximity of the crucifix to Jarman in this opening shot suggests that he is quite literally dreaming of the Passion. Mounted behind him, also within view of the crucifix, hangs a large probably late-Medieval or early modern painting of Christ displaying his wounds to the viewer. Close-up shots of the wounds reinforce the theme of the Passion (which is a narrative that typically invites the viewer to meditate upon, even "enter," Christ's wounds).<sup>109</sup>

Just prior to this opening scene, the film's title sequence shows Jarman's cottage in its garden setting from afar, making his home almost imperceptible through distance; the night's darkness is floodlit by a bank of stadium lights which encircle the space of the cottage and garden. The camerawork is fast and impressionistic, further blurring the already unrecognizable landscape. A narrator's voice, clearly speaking as Jarman, intones sonorously, dramatically:

I want to share this emptiness with you. Not to fill the silence with false notes or put tracks through the void. I want to share this wilderness of failure. The others have built you a highway, fast lanes in both directions.

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108 My own research reveals that part of *The Garden's* closing dialogue comes from Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which along with Cicero's *Dream of Scipio* constitutes the high classical models for the dream/vision allegory.

109 See Caroline Bynum Walker on this.

I offer you a journey without direction; uncertainty, and no sweet conclusion.

Inviting us into this "journey without direction," the narrator immediately orients us to the film's non-linear form and also echoes the anything but straightforward journey that Jarman is taking with AIDS. Then the voice pauses, and takes on a softer, more personal tone: "When the light faded I went in search of myself; there were many paths and many destinations." Here we have the film's definitive introduction and framing device. Echoing Augustine's famous words in the *Confessions*, Jarman tells us that the film is about his attempt to find himself, put to narrative form: self-writing, the most classic of ascetical-personal exercises. But most importantly, we are to understand that the catalyst for this activity, the "light fading," is the instance of Jarman's diagnosis as HIV-positive.<sup>110</sup> This event then, initiates Jarman's personal practice of asceticism.

However, the private, autobiographical tone of these lines uttered in this the film's opening title sequence (so familiar to the reader of Jarman's *Modern Nature*), is immediately intruded upon by the sound of Jarman's (actual) directorial voice, which, unlike the narrator/actor's dialogue which is dubbed in over the

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<sup>110</sup> The reader of *Modern Nature* can identify this in its similarity to Jarman's description of the day he was told he was HIV-positive.



film sequence, clearly emerges live from the recorded space of the film's visual scene itself. Just after the narrator speaks the film's opening lines, we hear Jarman comment enthusiastically: "That was a brilliant rehearsal. You still need to go through make-up, hair, wardrobe. We'll have a half an hour break."

Though the long distance, impressionistic shot of the floodlit garden and cottage affords us no clear view of this activity, Jarman is clearly speaking to the actors in his film. Thus the apparently private and literary tone which opens *The Garden* is immediately disrupted by the equally self-reflexive yet very public and communal activity of the film's making. Referring to the rehearsal process, the "constructed" details of hair, make-up and wardrobe, Jarman reminds us that this is not simply autobiography; this is a pageant, a passion play in the making.

What follows is a tightly paced, densely edited, visually stunning series of filmed tableaux set to music. *The Garden* interweaves several narratives, leaving the viewer to decode their relationship; emphasizing visual effect rather than coherent storyline, "the images move from starkly realistic shots in film to the theatrical, flattened video effects of the pop promo and television advertisement" (O'Pray 178).<sup>111</sup> After the sequence of Jarman's dreaming opens the film, a Satan figure in the

Garden of Eden crawls in slow moving pantomime towards a cowering Adam and Eve whose tear-streaked faces form theatrical grimaces. As Adam and Eve leave Eden, glancing forlornly behind them, we cut to a long wooden table where twelve elderly women ("distaff apostles") sit moving their fingers in circular motion along the edges of twelve glasses. An eerie humming sound emits as a beautiful young woman rises "miraculously" behind them, spreading open her arms in the familiar Christ-like posture of *caritas*. (Clearly filmed on a closed set, the backdrop of this scene is filled with garishly colored, projected images of the sea, with a sailing ship bobbing on the horizon). Next we move to super-8 footage of two young lovers, both men, hugging and kissing by a wooden boat, beached upon what is clearly Derek Jarman's coastline at Dungeness. Then a filmed image of the same beach: we recognize Derek Jarman, curled up in pain on a hospital bed that stands in the waves. A chain of bare-breasted men and women wearing white skirts that trail in the waves circle around him, holding burning torches above their heads. Eyes shut, Jarman writhes, twisting a wet sheet about him: Is this all a bad dream, the product of a night fever? Are the torch bearers muses? Cut again to the young woman who rose behind the twelve seated ladies. She sits alone at a wooden table, staring at the viewer with an intense gaze. Suddenly, she screams,

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111 O'Pray, Michael. *Derek Jarman: Dreams of England*. London: BFI, 1996.

pauses, and snuffs out the candle that alone had lit the scene.

After this sequence (in which the woman prophetic figure painfully foresees the impending Passion) the events of Christ's life unfold—some familiar, others entirely queer. Jarman begins with a sequence he calls "Mary of the photo opportunity," in which a beautifully arrayed and crowned Mary (played by the screaming and levitating young woman) sits enthroned with a paper-crowned baby Jesus on her lap. Masked "terrorist paparazzi" dressed in black crowd around her, commanding her to look this way, then that as they snap photographs with huge cameras: "that's it: lovely Mary; so pure." The scene grows violent as the photographers chase then wrestle Mary to the ground. Next, scenes of Jesus' boyhood unfold outside Jarman's cottage. The boy plays in the garden and then bathes a shaved, tattooed man in his twenties. Their playful, innocently sensual interchange is interrupted by a menacing interloper who wields a film camera. Subsequent scenes depict a drag queen Mary Magdalene being stoned by tafetta-gowned debutantes. Then the two young gay lovers are gaily celebrated in what appears to be a marriage ceremony only to be bound, gagged and flogged. Finally they take up the cross, undergoing the most familiar stages of Christ's passion. Constantly intercutting all this is footage of Jarman's cottage and garden. Slow-moving close-up footage--of bees

hovering over flowers, plants waving in wind and sunlight, waves gently, repeatedly crashing—this overwhelming sense of what Jarman calls “garden time” continually returns to the screen as a kind of palliative to the mounting violence of the Passion narrative.

Interestingly, although Jarman’s appearances in the film are few, somehow the story of the Passion which propels the film becomes recognizable as his own story. A leather-queen Satan seems to be a vision of dangerous queer lust personified. (Is it Jarman critiquing his own lust, or the way society has stereotyped it?). The boy Christ is more recognizable as the young Jarman so carefully depicted in *Modern Nature*. He is shown giving a bath to an older guy,<sup>112</sup> clearly a vision of Jarman’s own early, unrequited love, and then being harassed by a cane-wielding team of frowning British schoolmasters. One of the two queer lovers who actually suffer the Passion in place of the Christ figure (Christ playing an even more minor role than Jarman does, relegated to a similar position as witness to the film’s events), is played by Jarman’s actual lover, HB, whom the reader of *Modern Nature* knows very well. Finally one of the film’s most important characters is played by Jarman’s longtime muse and close friend, the actress Tilda Swinton. Represented in the film as having the closest ties to Jarman’s

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112 In *Modern Nature*, Jarman describes how he engages this young man to play the role of Judas in the film, picking him up in a London gay bar.

landscape, she is cast as a Marian figure who foresees and forewarns (but cannot impede the Passion). She suffers and consoles, confronting the viewer with intensely visible emotion. Does she do this for Jarman?<sup>113</sup>

Indeed, the film continually interweaves this recognizably autobiographical material (much of this filmed in super-8 with the clicking sound of the camera dubbed to underline the "home movie" effect) with a presentation of Christ's Passion, constantly blurring any easy distinction between these narratives.<sup>114</sup> In this respect, Jarman constructs an analogy between his personal life and the history and the story of Christ's Passion, effectively interweaving private and public narratives, staging his personal asceticism for wider consumption, insisting, as we will see, upon its social and political significance. This of course brings us to the question of why Jarman chose the Passion narrative as a vehicle for what he calls his "domestic drama."<sup>115</sup> In

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113 In *Modern Nature*, Jarman reveals Swinton's experience of the film: "Tilda said she experienced *The Garden* quite differently from *The Last of England* [Jarman's previous film]. It was as if she was 'trapped' in my dream. She found the film intensely personal...I feel the same way, can't really talk about the film. It's like talking about yourself!" (297).

114 Michael O'Pray, *Derek Jarman: Dreams of England*: "The film interweaves genres—a 'home movie' which collapses into the main narrative and a constructed fictional narrative that bleeds into the 'home movie'. Perhaps the film's greatest achievement is to forge an inextricable relationship between mythology and personal cinema(180).

115 In *Modern Nature*, Jarman describes *The Garden* as "a simple domestic drama, a document. No fiction. The smallest gestures" (130).

*Modern Nature*, Jarman himself professes some uncertainty; (“David asked me on the way back how I thought of all this. The truth is I didn’t—you start with one thing and end with another”) (202). Yet precisely because Jarman struggles with this question of the Passion (“How will I find my way? Why the life of Christ? Why the garden?”) (169), so must we. How and in what way does Jarman’s choice to stage a version of the Passion within the space of his garden extend and transform his asceticism?

Certainly in his art making, Jarman had consistently drawn from the classical and Christian sources that suffused his British imperial education, often posing them in dialectical tension, throwing in a queer (sometimes camp) sensibility to juxtapose the “historical” with the “modern.” Moreover, as an AIDS activist, Jarman felt the need to strike back at the Christian, Church-based social forces that fanned the flames of homophobic hysteria during the early AIDS epidemic.<sup>116</sup>

Most of the churches, like the U.S. and British governments, remained silent on the issue of AIDS when the disease first emerged. After a too-long, deadly silence, many Christian leaders joined the fray of homophobic AIDS commentary. Commenting upon the ridiculous responses of the Church of England towards

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Gays, Jarman argues: "these ill-informed, ill-mannered minds lead us to our deaths; therefore we must fight harder" (MN 239). Most importantly, Jarman connects the Church's present response to the AIDS epidemic (labeling it a punishment for sin), with its past persecutions, identifying this bloody history as "[a] murderous tradition which still continues to legislate against us" (MN 125-126).

According to Jarman's biographer, the film's concern with Christ's Passion springs from literary and artistic sources: "inspired by a painting of the crucifixion that hung in Prospect Cottage, and borrowing heavily from those two favorite Anglo-Saxon poems, 'The Dream of the Rood' and 'The Wanderer', he considered structuring the film around the crucifixion and the question of who merits or receives God's grace" (Peake 444). With *The Garden*, then, Jarman would pose the question: "for whom had Christ died?" (Peake 444).<sup>117</sup> Clearly Jarman poses this question as a critique of the homophobic church establishment which had already presumed to answer it on behalf of gays and lesbians, in the negative.

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116 A parallel document to *The Garden* would be \_\_\_'s film, *Stop the Church*, a document of ACT-UP's disruption of John, Cardinal O'Connor's mass at St. Patrick's Church in NYC.

117 From "An Archaeology of Soul" by Gray Watson in *Derek Jarman: A Portrait*. ed by Roger Wollen. NY: Thames and Hudson, 1996 "He believed that the most intimate and subtle nuances of individual experience could be directly relevant to issues of the widest social significance; so that, in remaining true to these whilst endowing them with aesthetic form, the artist performed a moral and political function" (47).

It's also clear that Jarman identifies his own suffering with the story of Christ's Passion.<sup>118</sup> Indeed, because Jarman so consistently positions himself and his art in reaction to the establishment, Jesus' similar stance (and his punishment for it) provides Jarman with an obvious and attractive analogue.<sup>119</sup> Jesus was crucified because he "acted up," and Jarman would be sensitive to the Christian establishment's whitewashing of this essential Christ-like aspect.<sup>120</sup> Indeed, my reading of *The Garden* will suggest that Jarman's version of "taking up the cross" (i.e., asceticism) calls for political and social activism as a response to the personal suffering caused by AIDS. Jarman departs here from hegemonic Christian asceticism, which rewards suffering and self-denial, but not anti-authoritarian activity.<sup>121</sup>

Ultimately, Jarman chooses the Passion narrative as an ideal vehicle for performing his asceticism on a larger, more public, even historical scale.<sup>122</sup> For the

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118 Describing some of his art in *Modern Nature*, Jarman says: "My paintings scramble the initials IHS HIV" (231).

119 And yet however earnestly he speaks from this victimized position, Jarman, can still critique himself: As he relates in *Modern Nature*, when he describes *The Garden* to a close friend, the fellow responds by saying: "Oh Derek, more of your martyr complex" (211).

120 Insert book title "Jesus Acted Up."

121 Liberation theology is a crucial exception here.

122 Gray Watson argues that Jarman "believed that the most intimate and subtle nuances of individual experience could be directly relevant to issues of the widest social significance; so that, in remaining true to these whilst endowing them with aesthetic form, the artist performed a moral and political function" From "An Archaeology of Soul" in *Derek Jarman: A Portrait*. Ed by Roger Wollen. NY: Thames and Hudson, 1996 (47).



Passion has been, since the Medieval period, the preeminent model for the Christian practice of asceticism, also known as *Imitatio Christi*. In using the Passion narrative, Jarman chooses a very public, very recognizable narrative apparatus, yet one that has been historically, quite elastic. Indeed, because the Passion narrative depends upon audience participation, in its very essence it lends itself to appropriation. Though it certainly has been a vehicle for a particular vision of Christian asceticism, its populist uses suggest that it has never rested firmly in the grips of the Church establishment.

To grasp the centrality of the Passion Narrative within Christian ascetic/aesthetic ideology, historians narrate its emergence in popularity within Medieval Europe. Attributing theological shifts<sup>123</sup> of that time to a new focus on the "humanity" of Christ, scholars cite the concomitant popularity and preponderance of narratives that describe both Christ's childhood and crucifixion as evidence for this changing conceptualization of the Christian deity. According to Thomas Bestul:

The nature of the so-called transformation was a fresh interpretation of the Incarnation that led to a new understanding of the importance of Christ's propitiatory

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123 Attributed to the writings of Anselm of Canterbury, these shifts have been appropriately called an "Anselmian transformation" (Bestul 35).

sacrifice of himself as a human on behalf of the whole human race. This in turn led to a heightened emphasis on Christ's suffering humanity, and an intense interest in all aspects of Christ's life in human flesh, an interest which, by extension, included the Virgin Mary as his mother. (35)<sup>124</sup>

Scholars look to this new theological focus on Christ's humanity to explain the late Medieval emergence of a spiritual movement that centered upon what is called "affective piety"—<sup>125</sup> or "a form of spirituality that differed from that of previous centuries by placing much greater emphasis on self-examination, the inner emotions, and the cultivation of an interior life" (Clark and Bestul 2). <sup>126</sup> The growth of this movement obviously signaled a concomitant transformation in the theory and practice of Christian asceticism, or the set of Church-sponsored disciplines that encouraged and fostered the individual's spiritual relationship with him or herself and thus, by extension, the deity.<sup>127</sup> Indeed, Thomas Bestul argues that

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124 Bestul, Thomas H. *Texts of the Passion: Latin Devotional Literature and Medieval Society*. Philadelphia: UP Press, 1996.

125 The growth of the "affective piety" movement started in the most innovative, reformist and devout religious orders. Associated with the Cistercians (Bernard of Clairvaux) and the Franciscans (Francis of Assisi).

126 *Cultures of Piety: Medieval English Devotional Literature in Translation* Anne Clark Bartlett and Thomas H. Bestul. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999

127 According to Bestul: "The new forms of devotion were at first largely restricted to the members of religious orders, but as early as the late eleventh century changed social, political, and economic conditions led to increased leisure time for the aristocratic laity. Many of them, especially women, took advantage of opportunities to

the "affective piety" movement encouraged "a new emphasis on individual spiritual growth, a greatly increased appreciation of the value of private meditation and contemplation as a means of effecting such spiritual growth" (Bestul 35).

Asceticism, or spiritual discipline in the "affective piety" spiritual movement was typified by the meditational use of devotional narratives which painstakingly described the life of Christ (with particular emphasis on his suffering); "affective piety" then, encouraged and invited a performance of feeling. Such a focus represented a true revolution in the tenor of ascetic practice: "the emotions, especially love directed toward the divinity, are not regarded as deleterious but are esteemed as a means of opening the way toward spiritual perfection" (Bestul 35). Our primary evidence for this movement are the incredible number of diverse devotional texts that its flowering engendered. These texts are hallmarked by their instrumental purpose, as such they were never written to stand apart from their practical use: "The primary intent of devotional literature is neither to delight nor to instruct (although it may do both incidentally), but rather to produce in the reader a receptivity: a frame of mind or emotional condition that prepares him or her for an

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cultivate a spiritual life through the practice of private devotion based upon monastic example" (35) *Texts of the Passion*.

encounter with the deity in the form of prayer, meditation, or contemplation" (Clark and Bestul 2). To guide the practitioner into such a state, many twelfth-century treatises encourage intense meditation on the Passion, recommending that the meditator place himself as though actually present at the events, forming detailed pictures through the faculty of the imagination. These developments belong to a form of devotion known as *imitatio Christi*, which emphasized participation in the events of Christ's life, especially the Passion. "Such participation and imitation expressed itself increasingly in literal or material, physical ways, often straining the limits of what was humanly possible to attain" (Bestul 147).

The following instructions from a 1454 Passion narrative exemplify this affective meditation, wherein the individual is encouraged to actively cultivate an intense state of feeling of sympathy towards Christ's suffering and sacrifice. In order to achieve an "inner vision" of Christ's Passion, the practitioner is advised to read the Passion narrative in a painstaking fashion:

Move slowly from episode to episode, meditating on each one, dwelling on each single stage and step of the story. And if at any point you feel a sensation of piety, stop: do not pass on as long as that sweet

and devout sentiment lasts. (Belting 47) (qtd. in Belting 47-48) <sup>128</sup>

Recent studies have only begun to account for the incredible number and popularity of such meditational texts, which have heretofore not been fully included within the literary canon. What is particularly fascinating about them is their sheer creativity. Because they aimed to present Christ's humanity and suffering in such a way as to evoke effective affective response, they take great liberty with the actual depiction of events in the Bible. As Thomas Bestul points out, these narratives are distinguished by their "lively invention of non-biblical details" (Bestul 17):

not only are the torments of the canonical gospels portrayed in a much elaborated level of detail and exactitude, but numerous other torments never mentioned in the gospels become a part of these accounts. Christ's beard is pulled, he is dragged along the ground by his hair and forced to kneel on hot egg shells. His cloak is removed with such violence that pieces of bleeding

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128 Belting, Hans. *The Image and Its Public in the Middle Age: Form and Function of Early Paintings of the Passion*. trans. Mark Bartusis and Raymond Meyer. New Rochelle: Aristide D. Caratzas, Publisher, 1990. "As early as the thirteenth century, the dissolution of the narrative sequence into stations of contemplation was already a literary principle in the Meditations" (Belting 47-48).

"The Passion's narrative structure allows individual events to be highlighted, or the isolation of particular sequences" (Swanson 6). R.N. Swanson "Passion and Practice: the Social and Ecclesiastical Implications of Passion Devotion in the Late Middle Ages" *The Broken Body: Passion Devotion in Late-Medieval Culture* Ed. A.A. MacDonald, H.N.B. Ridderbos and R.M. Schlusemann. Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1998

flesh which have stuck to it from the scourging are ripped from his back. The thorns of the crown of thorns are so sharp and long that they pierce his brain-pan. (Bestul 146)

As we can see, "the Passion narratives present a rewritten, reformulated, highly variable, and decidedly non-canonical biblical text (Bestul 17). Indeed, to the modern ear and eye they may well seem queer, gruesome, out of control in their emotions, and their encouragement of heightened affective states.<sup>129</sup> And it is precisely because they represent "a site of affective excess" that they have been difficult to analyze using modern aesthetic criteria (Clark and Bestul 3-4).<sup>130</sup> Yet they remain important and cannot be overlooked if we are to understand the development of Christian asceticism, and, I would argue, Jarman's *The Garden*.

Indeed, Jarman would no doubt be attracted to the Passion narrative's combination of excess affectivity and counter-canonicity. Particularly fond of the genre of visionary, devotional literature, he had read both Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe.<sup>131</sup> The latter's

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129 For an important discussion of affect and its social and political uses, see Cvetkovich's discussion on the 19th cen. sensation novel.

130 Clark and Bestul argue that this is why they "remain unjustly underappreciated": "when viewed as 'literature,' devotional texts often fall short of the aesthetic standards that we commonly seek in the technical skill of the Middle English alliterative revival, the sophistication of the era's debate poetry, or the intricacies of its courtly romances" (*Cultures of Piety* 3).

131 In *Modern Nature* Jarman also mentions reading *The Cloud of Unknowing*, *The Book of Changes*, *Song of Solomon* and *Revelations*. The first is a famous Medieval

autobiography (the first vernacular example of its genre in England) presents the story of a woman whose excessive displays of affect (stirred by much consumption of devotional texts)<sup>132</sup> pose a constant annoyance to the Church establishment. Indeed, Margery's uncontrolled, unseemly displays of feeling always place her on the knife's edge of heresy. Yet her story remains one of the most important records of the affective piety movement. Because her subjectivity was so suffused with affect for Christ's suffering and Passion, she posed a constant danger to the Church orthodoxy. Of course Jarman would be particularly sensitive to the precarious position of the visionary, the individual who sees and feels the true Christ and wants others to know. *The Garden*, in this sense emerges from a subject position somewhat akin to Margery Kempe's.<sup>133</sup>

Jarman opens his film with lines that instantly evoke the genre of devotional literature: "I want to share this

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visionary/devotional text while the others all figure importantly in the creation of devotional texts.

132 In the introduction to his translation of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, B.A. Windeatt emphasizes Kempe's "attachment to the tradition of meditation on the events of Christ's life," arguing that although she herself was illiterate, she had continued exposure to devotional texts such as the *Stimulus Amoris*, and the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, and Walter Hilton's *The Scale of Perfection* -all texts central to the affective piety movement. See Windeatt, B.A., Trans. *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985. (16-17).

133 In *Modern Nature* Jarman describes the scandal in the yellow press over the film's making: "The Mail's 'Gay Jesus Scandal Brews' has brought a hoard of journalists looking for a lead." This brouhaha leads Jarman to write: "Could the Garden be blasphemous? There are blasphemy laws in Germany as well as here, said Dagmar" (234).

emptiness with you...I want to share this wilderness of failure." Placing the film's viewer in the position of the devotee, Jarman invites him or her to take a devotional journey marked by states of affect. Indeed, Jarman wants the viewer to travel into his "wilderness of failure" without a map, to experience, no doubt, the reality of an illness that carries a deep social stigma and has no cure (or even effective treatment).

Inviting the viewer onto this "journey without direction", the narrative structure of the devotional journey that forms *The Garden* mirrors the Medieval Passion narrative, in its deeply non-linear structure. ("The Passion's narrative structure allows individual events to be highlighted, or the isolation of particular sequences").<sup>134</sup> Indeed, the "plot" of the film is confusing. Jarman's filmographer, Michael O'Pray, insists that *The Garden* "subverts any linear narrativity and an attempt to give a straightforward synopsis of the film would be misplaced" (178).<sup>135</sup> O'Pray is correct: the purpose of the film rests not on conveying a coherent story, but turns rather on the generation of viewer affect. Similarly, in its devotional use, the Passion

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R.N. Swanson "Passion and Practice: the Social and Ecclesiastical Implications of Passion Devotion in the Late Middle Ages" *The Broken Body: Passion Devotion in Late-Medieval Culture* Ed. A.A.MacDonald, H.N.B. Ridderbos and R.M. Schlusemann. Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1998. (6).

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135 O'Pray. Michael. *Derek Jarman: Dreams of England*. London: British Film Institute, 1996.



narrative was distinctly treated in a non-linear fashion. At any one sitting (or use) a meditator could mix-up, even wholly invent the events of Christ's Passion, precisely because the narrative's main purpose was malleability, inviting the meditator to stir him or herself into an intense emotional state. To accommodate this, devotional texts often used illustration to distill the Passion narrative into an intricate, economic vocabulary of visual symbols designed for the meditator's easy use. To further facilitate audience participation, guidelines for meditation would invite role-playing: "Readers might also identify (or choose not to identify) with a variety of subject positions: handmaid, son or daughter to the Virgin, apostle, bride of Christ, Christian knight, and even covert critic of the institutional Church" (Clark and Bestul 7-8).

In her essay, "The Principle of Non-Narration in the Films of Derek Jarman" Tracy Biga gives insight to how Jarman's *The Garden* might function as a postmodern type of devotional text.<sup>136</sup> Biga explains that Jarman's technique depends upon the distillation of narrative into visual symbol:<sup>137</sup>

The lack of character development and agency heightens the sense that Jarman's characters are images rather than particular

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136 Biga, Tracy. "The Principle of Non-Narration in the Films of Derek Jarman" *By Angels Driven: The Films of Derek Jarman*. Ed. by Chris Lippard Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996.

137 In planning the film Jarman insists that "the film must show the quaint illusion of narrative cinema threadbare" (MN 143).

points of view. In fact, point of view and its relation to hierarchy is at the crux of all the issues of intertextuality, specularization and manipulations of narrative form. Through his experimentation with these formal elements, Jarman refuses to erect those hierarchies of knowledge which typically help to motor narrative.<sup>138</sup>

Biga argues that "Jarman's principle of non-narration can be seen as an element of his artistic style, linked to a political strategy" (12). Writ large, that strategy is "a continual refusal of patriarchal logic and, with this refusal, a sense of undifferentiation inconsistent with the gendered law of the father" (12).<sup>139</sup> If Biga is correct in insisting that Jarman's use of "intertextuality, specularization and manipulations of narrative form" function on this level as a refusal of hierarchy and differentiation, then *The Garden* might very well operate like a postmodern version of a Medieval devotional narrative, in both its form and effect. As reader/viewer-oriented and empowered texts, devotional narratives called for individually-centered, experience-based acts of piety, acts which as such could not be easily controlled by the Church establishment and thus

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138 Biga, Tracy. "The Principle of Non-Narration in the Films of Derek Jarman" *By Angels Driven: The Films of Derek Jarman*. Ed. by Chris Lippard Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996.

139 "Significantly, *The Garden* depicts no heavenly father who sacrifices his son" (Biga 18).

were oft-considered subversive.<sup>140</sup> Indeed, as Thomas Bestul argues, these non-canonical, "gospel renarrations" of Christ's Passion effectively challenged the prevailing "view that the biblical text was fixed and immutable" (and in the interpretive hands of only a select few):

This implicit challenge to scholastic hegemony concerning the manner of how the Bible is to be used and read is contemporaneous with, and perhaps parallel to, the more overt challenge to institutional and hierarchical authority presented by the Wycliffite view of biblical interpretation. (Bestul 18)

Reminding us of the key role that devotional texts had in the development of the "mystical enterprise," Bestul suggests (after critic Steven Ozment) that mysticism and the texts that nurtured its growth might be understood as a form of "dissent ideology," which in its most radical forms took shape in such overt anti-hierarchical, anti-authoritarian works as that of the Lollards.<sup>141</sup>

It is important at this juncture to insist that the ascetic practices of the "affective piety" movement did not solely revolve around "the individual," and were thus not solely personal acts with simply private effects. Medievalist David Aers argues this forcefully, claiming

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140 In *Cultures of Piety*, Bestul and Clark write: "While devotional texts often reinforce the controlling belief systems of a society, they could also be sites of resistance to prevailing norms. In the later Middle Ages this was particularly true of visionary and mystical texts, often those written by women, as the Church was not slow to recognize (the fate of Margaret Porete, burned for heresy, is a notable example" (14).

141 For a recent argument that connects the relationship of Medieval Lollardy to contemporary sexual dissent, see Caroline Dinshaw's *Getting Medieval*.

that scholars who study the "affective piety" movement in Medieval Europe too often fail to ask critical, political questions, such as "how the dominant [Medieval] model of Christ's humanity encourages quite specific forms of imitation": an *imitatio Christi* that might contain and curtail radical activity rather than engender it (23).<sup>142</sup> Aers argues that scholars often take for granted the historical commonplace that a new theological focus on Christ's humanity led inevitably to an "intense concentration on [Christ's] Passion and Crucifixion, on a suffering sacrifice out of whose "stremes of blode" comes humanity's salvation" (22). Pointing out that choosing horrible suffering to represent "humanity" was not necessarily inevitable, Aers underlines the fact that "the Man of Sorrows, or suffering Christ, does not really appear in the Gospels" (37), rather what we find there is an "articulate, teaching, healing" Christ, "a layman with a public and prophetic set of practices" (37). Aers suggests that Medieval Church authorities fashioned an official *Imitatio Christi* that focused solely on Christ's Passion and suffering to occlude "the fact that according to the Gospels it was the official unacceptability of Jesus' public teaching and style of life that led to his trial and horrible death" (39). "What kind of imitation might this dominant model encourage among the devout?"

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142 Aers, David and Lynn Staley. *The Powers of the Hoky: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture*. University Park: Penn State University Press, 1996.

Aers asks (22). "Did anyone seek to circumvent the dominant figurations of the tortured, bleeding body on the Cross?" (37).

Aers raises objections to studies (such as Caroline Walker Bynum's) that focus solely on the effects that officially-sponsored sets of ascetic practices based on Christ's suffering and Passion had on individuals, claiming that such scholarship often too easily celebrates these effects as "empowering"; rather, Aers would have us consider more carefully the public, political and ideological forces that such practices served. Finding an exception in Sarah Beckwith's recent work on the ideological and political uses of Medieval figurations of Christ's body, Aers reminds us that "images such as Christ's wounds were not simply subject to an intensely affective devotion of private religion—they were also symbols of political power" (57).

Indeed, quoting the work of Dominican theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, Aers claims that "the symbol of the cross becomes a disguised legitimation of social abuses" (39). The Medieval *Imitatio Christi* thus centered on a "suffering Jesus" who suffered for suffering itself rather than for specific, political reasons. Aers continues:

Schillebeeckx maintains that Christ's suffering became isolated "from the historical events which made it a suffering through and for others because

of his critical preaching." In this way, he notes elsewhere, the dominant tradition sidelines the active preacher of the kingdom, the one demanding "unconditional and liberating sovereign love...a new relationship of human beings to God, with as its tangible and visible side a new type of liberating relationship between men and women," a society "where master-servant relationships no longer prevail, quite different from life under Roman occupation." (40)

If Aers is correct here in arguing that the Medieval Passion narrative removed Christ's suffering "from the historical events which made it a suffering through and for others because of his critical preaching," than Jarman's *The Garden* can be seen as an interesting postmodern corrective to this ideological dilemma. Indeed, as if to admit that the Passion narrative in its dominant form poses too large and ahistorical a mass to be tampered with, Jarman places Jesus to the side, forcing him (or perhaps giving him the luxury to) serve only as a witness these much repeated events. Jarman then politicizes the Passion by bringing it into his contemporary historical moment, making it work as a vehicle for his own suffering and personal concerns.<sup>143</sup> However, Jarman does not portray these

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143 In this sense Jarman reverses the process of affective/devotional meditation, in which the meditator is advised to enter into the events of Christ's Passion. With *The*

concerns as solely personal. By placing himself on the margins of the film, just as he does with Jesus, Jarman brackets off the personal dimensions of his suffering and highlights instead the way that it is publicly shared in the experience of other queers. Thus the story of suffering in *The Garden* is distributed: two queer lovers suffer the Passion instead of Christ. A drag queen plays Mary Magdalene. The boyhood Jesus is a young queer. And Judas is revealed as a queer who may have died because of his internalized homophobia. Most importantly, Jarman's film foregrounds the power of the feminine in the Passion that dominant versions also choose to overlook and even reject. As if to say that his queer version of the Passion emerges from the female mystic subject position that paved the way for the narrative's strategic appropriation, Jarman makes his twelve apostles wizened old women. Building and extending upon the cult of the Virgin (which bears important historical relation to the popular uses of the Passion narrative), Jarman makes his Mary figure a prophet and seer in a larger sense. Her relationship to the landscape endows her with pre-Christian powers.

While some might suggest that Jarman's appropriation of the Passion narrative remains more a failed exercise in camp posturing, rather than an

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Garden, Jarman appropriates Christ's Passion, forcing its events into a contemporary queer context.

effective political statement, I would answer that camp and humor plays a role in Jarman's film too, but this only serves to underline the very public and social activity of theatrical performance. This in turn extends Jarman's practice of asceticism to include the ACT-UP-style public demonstration, which draws upon camp strategies to achieve very pragmatic and political goals.

Also, historical studies of the devotional text insist upon the a consideration of the effects that theatrical, liturgical and cultic performances had upon the otherwise "individual" ascetic practices of devotion and meditation on the Passion. Supporting the argument that devotional meditation cannot be reified as a solitary exercise, solely individually practiced and negotiated, these studies insist that the public experience of the Passion narrative played an inextricable role in its private consumption and use during Medieval times.

Thomas Bestul reminds us that: "The great medieval engagement with the Passion expressed itself in many ways, in art, literature, theology, as well as in religious practice and the forms of everyday life" (1)

Hans Belting insists upon the impact that mixed-media had on the development of individual and collective religious psychology in his influential study of early paintings of the Passion, *The Image and Its Public in the Middle Ages*: "The frequently cited psychology of the devotional image



relates back so strongly to the 'staging' of the public cultic worship, that the private element, stimulative though it was for certain motifs, seems to operate secondarily" (84).

Belting asserts that living actors drew visual images from paintings and sculptures, mimicking in public "cultic performances" the gestures and scenes a public would recognize from plastic and textual representation of the Passion:

In the songs of lamentation and the cultic plays of Holy Week, frontiers of psychological realism were explored in a way hardly possible in other areas of Medieval culture. And in the devotional images, a pictorial rhetoric was developed that served this psychological realism and prepared the way for a new role and use of images as such. Texts and images complemented and corroborated each other in articulating the experience of a newly and personally accessible reality. (Belting 90)<sup>144</sup>

In *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages*, Gail McMurray Gibson, corroborates Belting's argument. In particular, McMurray underlines the connection between the devotional Passion text and the local performances of the Passion and

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<sup>144</sup> Belting, like Bestul, connects this activity to mysticism: "The increasing number of reports of visions from the thirteenth century onward is eloquent testimony of the desire to experience the reality offered in communal cultic worship in a more personal way" (90).

Miracle dramas: "It is probably fair to say that the Pseudo-Bonaventure's *Meditationes*, was, with the sole exception of the Bible and apocryphal gospels, the single most influential text upon the vernacular English drama" (10). McMurray chooses one example to distill the way representations of the Passion in all their diverse media contributed to the individual and communal conceptualizations of piety. Singling out a famous cross that was "enormously popular with pilgrims," McMurray tells us that "records do survive of a celebrated crucifix, the Rood of Grace from the Cistercian Abbey of Boxley in Kent, which had been designed by means of 'certain engines and old wires' to nod its head, move its eyes, and to shed tears in response to the prayers of penitents" (15). McMurray connects this cross to the intense affective states of devotion exemplified by devotees such as Margery Kempe, who sought "the visible and tangible reality of her incarnate Savior":

To feel Christ's arms reaching down in physical embrace from the Cross, to see Christ's heart blood "renne in my sleve," to see the Word made Flesh in the image of a moving statue or a player's feigned bloody hands—these are the concrete and incarnational devotions of the fifteenth century.

(18)

The performative elements encapsulated by this crying cross resonate throughout Jarman's film. In *The Garden*,

Jarman strives to mimic the powerful affectivity of the medieval devotional text, to acknowledge its necessary place within his contemporary homosexual asceticism. Indeed, Jarman is fascinated by the place of this excess affectivity within the medieval aesthetic, identifying it as a public, theatrical link to the practice of asceticism that is most often overlooked or misunderstood in our contemporary moment. Jarman rectifies this mistake with *The Garden*, taking his viewers on a devotional journey which acts much like time travelling: the intricate and almost inaccessible realm of Medieval piety is made accessible through the wonders of postmodernity.

## Chapter Five: David Wojnarowicz, Queer Mystic Visionary

"You know, living in America, it's like we're all used to getting fucked, but I prefer to feel the weight of somebody on me when I'm getting fucked."

--David Wojnarowicz <sup>145</sup>

A multimedia artist known most widely today for his personal essays and journals, David Wojnarowicz firmly established his authorial voice when his anthology *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* appeared in 1991, one year before his death from AIDS.<sup>146</sup> A collection of autobiographical essays, the pieces shift in tone from the polemical to the visionary-fantastic, often mixing the two styles. As poetic-polemical discourses on queer vision, these writings are testimony to Wojnarowicz' extraordinary gift as a seer and mystic, a gift that AIDS only

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145 Goldin, Nan. "Love, Sex, Art and Death: In September of 1990, David Wojnarowicz and photographer Nan Goldin, longtime friends, sat down to a three hour conversation..." *Aperture*. No.137. Fall, 1994.

146 Cooper, Dennis. *Odd Man Out*. *Artforum*. Oct 1999 v38 i2 p130. Cooper contrasts Wojnarowicz literary with his plastic arts, with preference given to the former: "Whereas Wojnarowicz's art is probably doomed to an eternity spent in gay- and/or AIDS-themed group shows, his writing is far more likely to be remembered. Falling into loose association with similarly self-taught, self-absorbed geniuses like Jean Genet, Celine, and his beloved Rimbaud, Wojnarowicz's poetic, ranting prose translates his life story, fantasies, and outrage at society's imbalance into something that bears little stylistic resemblance to other writing, but rings as natural as any diaristic jotting. Where most of his visual art works have a slight staginess problem, and tend toward the illustrative and agitprop, his inventive yet direct use of language encompasses his deeply contradictory nature without the least sign of strain."

intensified. Indeed, Wojnarowicz has been called "the plague's visionary witness" (87).<sup>147</sup>

In this chapter I will argue that David Wojnarowicz can best be read and understood as a queer mystic whose writings document his intense experience of mystical visions.<sup>148</sup> While the voice of the traditional mystical subject has often been silenced as potential social protest by interpretations that emphasize its passivity and ineffability, Wojnarowicz' clear, angry, moving voice defies such containment.<sup>149</sup> And though *Close to the Knives* definitely explores the possibility for mystical transcendence, it is above all a transcendence anchored in social protest.<sup>150</sup> Indeed, I

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147 Carr, C. "Portrait in Twenty-three Rounds." *Fever: The Art of David Wojnarowicz*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1998.

148 In his introduction to *Trajectories of Mysticism in Literature and Theory*, Philip Leonard defines mysticism as the goal of "union" or "direct and personal awareness of a transcendent authority (such as God, Providence, the Creator, Brahman, Nirvana, mana, the Infinite, arche or telos)" (x). Leonard stresses that access to this union is most often "through less rational means (such as dreams, visions, dance, drugs, intuition, ecstatic inspiration or madness)" (xi).

149 As a corrective to traditional discussions of mysticism, I will suggest that the essays in *Close to the Knives* are profitably read through the lens of Grace Jantzen's critique of such modern, discourse on religious mysticism, which, she argues, has typically elided the revolutionary potential of the mystical subject by reifying it within the isolated, ahistorical realm of a post-Jamesian psychological individualism. Wojnarowicz's descriptions of his mystic-visionary experience, however, resist such conservative interpretation because he grounds them firmly within a trenchant political commentary. See Grace Jantzen. *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

150 Jeremy Carrette and Richard King remind us that the "discourse of 'transcendence' is always ideologically motivated"; Indeed, its "political dynamic" is "slippery": "it means many things to many people and is used to support and challenge all sorts of different systems of belief" (139). Carrette, Jeremy, and Richard King. "Giving 'Birth' to Theory:

will suggest that precisely in weaving together polemical with visionary writing, David Wojnarowicz forwards a contemporary, political definition of "queer mystic" which he enacts throughout the essays that form *Close to the Knives*.

Wojnarowicz achieves his mystical self-transcendence most forcibly in the scenes of ecstatic queer sex that circulate through his narrative.<sup>151</sup> Because these intensely visceral scenes of sexual union with an eroticized other so frequently punctuate the essays that form *Close to the Knives*, I see them as crucial keys for interpreting the spiritual significance of his overall oeuvre. Moreover, because these scenes parallel, yet crucially revise, the classical narrative of mystic union with the deity/other, I interpret them as queer, postmodern revisions of mystical-visionary experience, and, most crucially, of the ascetic imperative that has traditionally undergirded the preparation for and cultivation of this experience.

Indeed, genealogies of Christian mysticism point most often to its genesis within Platonic and neo-Platonic philosophy, which posited man's highest goal

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Critical Perspectives on Religion and the Body." *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies*, 19 (1): 123-143.

<sup>151</sup> Remarking on the numerousness of these scenes in Wojnarowicz' writings, one critic said: "his portrayals of gay men and pickups on the West Side piers during this time are

as union with the divine *nous* (or intellect).<sup>152</sup>

Prerequisite to such a union was recourse to a strict asceticism, or a process of self-purification built upon a negation of the body. Yet paradoxically, this union was described as an erotic one. For example, in the *Phaedrus* Plato narrates the journey of man's soul to its divine mirror image as analogous to the scene of erotic transcendence achieved in sex; however, Plato insists upon the very interposition of asceticism to interrupt any actual sexual consummation.<sup>153</sup> Thus while *eros* serves an important purpose as catalyst for the Platonic vision of the soul's union with the Ideal, it must necessarily drop out of sight in all but its non-corporeal (or spiritual) form.

To articulate their own version of mystical experience, Christian theologians built upon the Platonic and neo-Platonic visions of divine union, while also integrating Judaic and Egyptian (or Alexandrian) mystical strands. Continuing with the

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certainly passionate, though sometimes repetitive." Review. In *The Shadow of the American Dream: The Diaries of David Wojnarowicz*. *Publishers Weekly*, Dec 21, 1998 v245 i51 p47(1).  
152 Bernard McGinn gives us a basic summary of the Platonic philosophy that would lay the cornerstone for Christian mysticism: "Plato views the true human subject, or soul, as a searcher always restless short of permanent possession of the Absolute Good which beatifies. Such possession is achieved through *theoria*, or contemplation, which is the fruit of an ascending purification (*katharsis*, *askesis*) of both love and knowledge which reaches its goal when *nous*, the divine element in the soul, is assimilated to its supernal source" (25).

153 To relay his allegory of the union of man's soul to its divine image, Plato uses the analogy of the very physical, sexual attraction of a man to a beautiful boy; approving

Platonic conceit that divine union is best communicated through erotic imagery, the Christian theological doctors seized upon the Song of Songs, whose steamy narrative of connubial consummation became the reigning trope for Christian *unio mystica*. As Bernard McGinn argues in *The Foundations of Mysticism*, Origen's third-century *Commentary on the Song of Songs* "would become the classic proof text" for the Christian notion of mystical union with God as an erotic union of the bride, or soul, with the bridegroom, or God.<sup>154</sup> The erotic images that predominate in the Song of Songs, "the kiss of the mouth, the taste of the breasts, and the wound of love" would thus take on central importance within Christian mystical theology after Origen. But of course, as Grace Jantzen reminds us in her "counter-history" of Christian mysticism: "the spiritual senses" that these erotic activities are meant to properly refer to, "can only come into their own when the physical senses are severely disciplined" (91).<sup>155</sup>

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and drawing upon the power of this attraction, he nonetheless counsels against its physical consummation.

<sup>154</sup> Origen, roughly contemporary to Plotinus, was influenced by the latter's thought; this shows the proximity of neo-Platonism to the development of early Christian mysticism.

<sup>155</sup> Rumored to have castrated himself in a feat of ascetic heroism, Origen provides one of the early Christian arguments for virginity as the necessary path for divine union. This early position, which held sexual life in marriage as an inferior path to the divine, was of course amended with Augustine. See Peter Brown's *The Body and Society*.



In *Close to the Knives*, Wojnarowicz' scenes of ecstatic queer sex do not depart from the erotic symbology that structures the classic mystical fixation on achieving spiritual union with the other; however in direct opposition to Plato, the neo-Platonists, and early Christian fathers--who insist upon the strictly non-material (or "spiritual") sensuality of mystical union--Wojnarowicz tells us: "I prefer to feel the weight of somebody on me when I'm getting fucked."

Rejecting the classical and Christian prescription for a solely metaphorical fuck, Wojnarowicz forwards a queer counter-asceticism as intimately bound to his queer mysticism. Indeed, as the genealogy of mysticism attests, asceticism can also be understood as the (historically variable) prescriptive path that leads to the mystical experience. In this chapter I will argue that because Wojnarowicz's asceticism affirms the role of sex in his path to mystical union, he challenges the dominant classical and Christian versions of asceticism--even our own contemporary vision of what counts as asceticism--all of which exclude sex; However, I will insist that his route is nonetheless an asceticism, albeit, more specifically, a contemporary queer one.

Like the spiritual doctors mentioned above, Wojnarowicz guides our interpretation of his mystical text; however, unlike them, he insists upon the

corporeality of his ecstatic mystical union. So although his queer sexual exchanges trace the erotic trajectory that forms classical discourse on mystical union, he argues that his sex acts are not just allegorical, but material practices vibrating with socio-political power. Indeed, by situating his sex acts within a particular, queer cosmography, Wojnarowicz leaves us no doubt that he sees queer sexual union as a strategic contest against a social order that has colonized his very subjectivity.

Wojnarowicz uses queer public sex to enter into his visionary landscape most fully, most bodily. As he puts it, sex allows him to experience his own "ultimate climax": a vision of his own life and death that paradoxically carries him out of his body while placing him very much into his flesh. Moreover, as linked synergistically to the "ultimate climax," his own orgasm also reveals the "order and disorder" of the "civilizational landscape," making his queer sexual ecstasy a politically powerful, visionary act.<sup>156</sup>

Throughout *Close to the Knives* Wojnarowicz locates his visionary and mystical experience within the closely related states of sex and travel; indeed, travel pushes Wojnarowicz "to experience charges of frustrating sexuality" which invest his visionary

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156 Grace Jantzen tells us that "ecstasy" derives "from the Greek ek-stasis, which literally means 'standing outside oneself'" (106).

landscape with a sexy corporeality (27). On the road, Wojnarowicz fashions himself into a vehicle of ceaseless desire: cruising as he travels, he is in constant search for erotic union with another to assuage his solitude. Moreover, both sex and travel offer him a chance to "shake all the ropes off, even the ropes of mortality." Both states allow him to defy gravity, and, if only momentarily, to experience a kind of freedom: "one can jump at least three or four feet in the air and even though gravity will drag us back to earth again, it is in the moment we are three or four feet in the air that we experience true freedom" (41).

Sex and travel bring him to a visionary landscape that is thoroughly corporeal, "a sudden vision of the World, a transient position of the body" (108). Indeed, this transience extends to his very identity: "I came to understand that to give up one's environment was also to give up biography and all the encoded daily movements: those false reassurances of the railing outside the door" (108). Through sex and travel, Wojnarowicz enters instead a "place that might be described as interior world. The place where movement was comfortable, where boundaries were stretched or obliterated: no walls, borders, language or fear" (108).

Throughout *Close to the Knives*, Wojnarowicz uses both sex and travel to achieve such a self-abstraction,

fragmentation, or straying from self. Indeed, he values it for what it teaches him about himself, the world, and his place in it. His asceticism, then, is precisely his constant cultivation of this state of self-abstraction through the programmatic, interrelated use of sex, drugs and travel. As Wojnarowicz states: "If I could figure out a way to remain forever in transition, in the disconnected and unfamiliar, I could remain in a state of perpetual freedom" (62).

In what follows, I will read two scenes from *Close to the Knives* in which Wojnarowicz depicts his queer ecstatic sex. I will show how Wojnarowicz uses the scene of queer public sex to enact the dis-ontology of the "limit-experience" by effectively transforming the classical scene of mystical union into a Foucauldian challenge to the body's imprisonment, within traditional asceticism, by the Western disciplinary apparatus of "the soul."  
Wojnarowicz' *Queer Unio Mystica* <sup>157</sup>

Although the pall of epidemic pervades every page of *Close to the Knives*, Wojnarowicz makes no direct reference to AIDS until well into the third essay, entitled "In the Shadow of the American Dream: Soon All

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157 "Mystical Union (Lat., unio mystica) is the unmediated, transforming experience of the unification of man or man's soul with the highest reality" (239). Marcoulesco, Ileana. "Mystical Union." *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. Ed. Mircea Eliade. New York: Macmillan, 1987.

This Will Be Picturesque Ruins." Wojnarowicz there relates:

I remembered a friend of mine dying from AIDS, and while he was visiting his family on the coast for the last time, he was seated in the grass during a picnic to which dozens of family members were invited. He looked up from his fried chicken and said, "I just want to die with a big dick in my mouth." (44)

This scene intertwines death and dying with sex, or erotic engulfment.<sup>158</sup> In doing so it recalls the classic trajectory of the mystic and visionary who seeks spiritual union with the deity<sup>159</sup> which is metaphorized as an erotic union with the other (who takes the form of a bridegroom or lover).<sup>160</sup> Moreover,

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158 To provide a basic definition of mysticism in his general introduction to *The Foundations of Mysticism*, Bernard McGinn quotes "the great mystical Doctor of the Church St. Teresa of Avila": "I used unexpectedly to experience a consciousness of the presence of God of such a kind that I could not possibly doubt that he was within me or that I was wholly engulfed in him" (xiii).

159 The proximity of articles on "mysticism" with "mystical union" in Mircea Eliade's *the Encyclopedia of Religion* testifies to their profound link. Indeed, the mystic is a sort of vehicle of ceaseless desire for union with the divine. Bernard McGinn cautions us, however, from overemphasizing the unitive experience to the exclusion of the entire life process that surrounds it: "Although the essential note—or, better, goal—of mysticism may be conceived of as a particular kind of encounter between God and the human, between Infinite Spirit and the finite human spirit, everything that leads up to and prepares for this encounter, as well as all that flows from or is supposed to flow from it for the life of the individual in the belief community, is also mystical, even if in a secondary sense. Isolation of the goal from the process and the effect has led to much misunderstanding of the nature of mysticism" (xvi).

160 For a penetrating discussion of the "sexual freight" that such narratives of spiritual union often carry, see Dolores Wojciehowski's analysis of Teresa of Avila's "rhetoric of self-mortification" in Wojciehowski's *Old Masters, New Subjects: Early*

the scene weaves together a congeries of states, including transgression, transcendence, sex, death and loss of self, that are essential to understanding Wojnarowicz as a postmodern, queer mystic-visionary who exercises the Foucauldian limit-attitude as a queer ascesis.

When he recounts this story in *Close to the Knives*, Wojnarowicz is on a road trip somewhere in the American West. He recalls the anecdote during a particularly still (yet restless) moment, a lull in his journey, when he has pulled off the highway into a rest stop to pee. Prior to this pit stop, he has spent endless hours behind the wheel. "Driving a machine through the days and nights of the empty and pressurized landscape," Wojnarowicz tells us, "eroticizes the whole world flitting in through the twin apertures of the eyes" (26). Here we truly grasp Wojnarowicz's own self-understanding: in true mystical form, he is wholly a vehicle of desire.

Fleeting, momentary sightings of others become engines of fantasy. Passing a group of road workers eating their lunch causes him to envision stopping to pick one of them up. ("Now I am seated next to his body in the front seat. We are travelling and speaking soundlessly") (27). Wojnarowicz' fantasy continues as

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*Modern and Poststructuralist Theories of Will*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995. (123-142).

he imagines "the almost inaudible click of his zipper riding down between the fingers in slow motion" and "the taste of sperm at the edge of a lake cast into shadows by the surrounding mountainsides" (27).

Wojnarowicz' visionary landscape, so corporeal we can feel and taste it, is, in this instance, actually phantasmagoric, only "the hungry unreeling of all this in the unraveling landscape of dry scrub plains through the front windshield and the rearview mirror" (27). Indeed, Wojnarowicz is alone.

Wojnarowicz' desire slowly gathers heat within the "sunburned interior" of his car. Solitude hangs in the stifling air, and his "balls are sliding in lonesomeness" (27). Exploring the physical and emotional contours of his solitude, he states: "For one brief moment in time no one in the world knows where I am. Not family, friends, nor members of government and that causes me to drift, gives me room to experience charges of frustrating sexuality" (27). Here Wojnarowicz associates queer sexual desire with the loosening grip of a heteronormative identity. For company, Wojnarowicz turns on the radio, tuning into a "seductive country song." As he listens he gets turned on, "turn[ing] up the volume so I can hear the reverberation of sound in the man's throat" (43). This guttural siren song pushes Wojnarowicz into fantasizing the singer "whispering sweet things in my ear as he

fucks me, holding firm to my hips with his calloused hands" (43). "[L]ost in the heat of his torso and the taste of his tongue," Wojnarowicz dozes "in a hypnotic daze of calamity" as the highway spins on beneath him(43).

The insistence of Wojnarowicz' sexual need coincides with the call of nature, forcing him to pull over for a bathroom break. A public space innocuous to only the uninitiated, the rest stop is the archetypical site on the road map of queer public sex; its environs are suffused with the exchange of non-verbal energy, a system of codes and signals for a desire imperceptible to the general public, yet happening within their full view. Wojnarowicz isn't there just to pee.<sup>161</sup>

Wojnarowicz finds himself completely alone at the rest stop, now "gasping from a sense of loss and desire" (39). To assuage these feelings, he walks around the rest stop, waiting, absent mindedly studying the animal life which alone populates the space. Praying for a man, Wojnarowicz conjures one up with his own bodily fluids, "pointing my dick in different directions so the urine formed a dark outline of a face in the dry earth"(44). He feels "sad and exhilarated simultaneously":

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161 See Lee Edelman's "Tearrooms and Sympathy, or the Epistemology of the Water Closet," *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, NY: Routledge, 1993.



At the sound of each approaching car my dick grew more hard but each car continued without stopping. I wanted to run out into the dusk and throw myself headfirst onto the earth and roll sideways for miles until the sun came back. (44)<sup>162</sup>

Suspended in the morass of his desire for union with another, Wojnarowicz stumbles upon a sort of epiphany: "Darkness had completely descended onto the landscape and I stood up and stretched my arms above my head and wondered what it would be like if it were a perfect world. Only god knows. And he is dead" (45).

Wojnarowicz' rest stop epiphany ends here, but later on in this essay, he describes another visit to a rest stop where he fulfills his desire to connect with another man.

Inside the men's room at this other rest stop, he enters an empty stall, drops his trousers and waits. Noticing a "glory hole" bore into the partition which adjoins the neighboring stall, Wojnarowicz sees "[a]n eye peering through" so he leans down to get a better glimpse:

I could see a disembodied hand pulling on a large uncircumcised dick. I bounced my own dick in the palm of my hand so the eye could see it. I waited a few minutes till the sound of the rest room door

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<sup>162</sup> See Teresa of Avila's descriptions of her bodily raptures. Wojciehowski acknowledges the undercurrent of sexual frenzy that underlies these, describing them as figural rapes,

opening and closing subsided, then stood up and pulled my pants back up and motioned toward the hole, giving the guy a signal to meet me outside. (48-9)

In "the hot glare of sunlight" outside, "families were going back and forth from their cars to the rest rooms" (49). The two men emerge separately into the din, assessing each other without words. Wojnarowicz remarks that initially, they "both acted shy, but within minutes were in our separate cars heading onto the interstate to look for a side road that would give us cover from the eyes of the world, a place away from the trooper patrol cars where we could get to know each other. There is no such place in that part of Arizona" (50).

Pulling off the highway, the men "drifted down a service road in a swirl of dust and pebbles" (51). They park and Wojnarowicz ventures over to the other man's car, "opened the door and slid into the hot front seat" (51). The other man "was staring straight ahead out the windshield" as he waits for "a car filled with vacationers" to pass them by. Eyes made blank to the possible glare of these strangers, he gestures at a level that only Wojnarowicz can perceive: "His hands were gently smoothing over the folds in his trousers

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which evoke a "rhetoric of dismemberment" (138-139).

around the general area of his crotch" (51). When "the tourist car passed" the two men are alone again:

his face turned toward me and began the slow swim through space toward mine. His rich dark eyes set into the general outline of his face slowly obscured my view of his hand undoing the zipper of his trousers and reaching into the resulting envelope of cloth, "You ain't a cop are you?" The heat inside the car was so saunalike that I was pouring sweat down my face, under my arm and over my chest where it cooled in the slight breeze. His face was an inch from mine when he saw the answer--no--in my eyes and his tongue slipped between parted lips and entered my mouth. (52-3)

Embracing instantly, they pull off each other's clothes. Wojnarowicz declares: "This guy was so intensely sexy I almost couldn't look him in the eye" (52). As their frenzied exchange ensues, Wojnarowicz begins to have the paradoxical feeling of being both within and without his own body. ("I don't know what it was; perhaps his height, his large hands...his head viewed from above, or kneeling, his knees viewed from a close angle.")<sup>163</sup>

As Wojnarowicz leaves his body it becomes unclear who is looking, who is looked at. Body parts are often

unlinked with possessive pronouns as Wojnarowicz' subjectivity dissolves. "Time had lost its strobic beat and all the structures of sensation and taste and sight and sound became fragmented" (54). Wojnarowicz is fragmenting too, declaring "I love getting lost like this":

to be surrounded by this sense of displacement, as this guy's tongue pulls across my closed eyelids and down the bridge of my nose, or to be underneath all that stillness with this guy's dick in my mouth, lends a sense of fracturing. It's as if one of my eyes were hovering a few feet above the car and slowly revolving to take in the landscape and the small car with two humans inside slowly licking each other's bodies into a state of free-floating space and semiconsciousness and an eventual, small, momentary death. (54-5)

Paradoxically, though Wojnarowicz has the sensation of standing outside of himself, seeing the whole scene from afar, he also comes so close to the lover that he can "see the hallucinogenic way his pores are magnified and each hair is discernible from the other" (56). ("My eyes are microscopes. My eyes are magnifying lenses. My face is plowing through the heat and sensations of this guy's flesh.") In this moment

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163 Their sex is periodically interrupted by approaching vehicles: "In the moment of their approach, we would stop, rearrange our anatomies, zip up our pants and assume the

the two men come so near that they appear to merge. In the "depths of fever, Wojnarowicz hallucinates that this guy and I are part of the same vascular system; he and I are two eyeballs sitting in the dark recesses of a metallic skull viewing the world through the windshield the way eyes would if they could proportion and transmit information independent of each other as well as recall separate private histories. (56)

Here Wojnarowicz imagines that the two men become one being yet maintain their independence: they can "transmit information" separately; they can own their "private histories" yet still share a mutual corporeality. Paradoxically, they merge without entirely losing their separate selves, thus confounding binary logic.

Taking the man's penis in his mouth "past the gag-reflex," Wojnarowicz starts to hyperventilate as it "rubs the walls of my throat" (56). "I am losing the ability to breath and feeling a dizziness descend" he gasps, but likening this sensation to "the drift and breeze created by the whirling dervish," Wojnarowicz clearly values this blow job as not simply a sexual act, but as a kind of sacred ritual. Leaving us no doubt that this is also an ascetic exercise, he declares that he is "using the centrifugal motion of

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body language and gaze of tourists losing themselves in the sky for an afternoon" (55).

spinning and spinning and spinning to achieve the weightlessness where polar gravity no longer exists”:

The sounds of his breath and the echo of his body movements I am no longer able to separate. The pressure of the anxiety slips in closer...nearing the moment where the soul and the weight of the flesh disappears in the fracture of orgasm: the sensation of the soul as a stone skipping across the surface of an abandoned lake, hitting blank spots of consciousness, all the whirl of daily life and civilization spiraling like a noisy funnel into my left ear, everything disintegrating, a hyperventilating break through the barriers of time and space and identity. (57)

“In the moment of orgasm,” says Wojnarowicz, “I’m losing myself” (57). Describing this loss of self as “breaking the mental and physical barrier,” an ecstatic Wojnarowicz dissolves, if only momentarily, the body/soul dichotomy, slipping, as does the classic mystical subjectivity, into ineffability: “I’m listening to my soul speak in sign language or barely perceptible whisperings” (57). Wojnarowicz appears to leave his body and consciousness entirely; when he regains himself, his lover is “smacking me in the face to rouse me from this sleep,” whispering “Where were you?” (57).

Coming to, Wojnarowicz immediately anchors the scene in a very violent socio-political fantasy: "and had a cop car pulled up in that moment and I had possession of a gun, I'd have not thought twice about opening fire" (57).<sup>164</sup> In claiming that he would not hesitate to reach for his gun, Wojnarowicz argues for the revolutionary potential of queer sex, sending out a rallying cry for its defense. Consciously blurring the lines between his fantasy and its very real context, Wojnarowicz insists: "If those cops showed up in that moment I described above, I thoroughly believe that they have no right and that their laws don't reflect me" (58).

In *Close to the Knives*, Wojnarowicz' orgasm represents the classic mystical experience of ecstasy, or standing outside the self, an action which appears to blur the spirit/flesh binary. In this sense, Wojnarowicz suggests that his queer sex offers him the possibility for mystical transcendence, yet he anchors this transcendence quite firmly in social protest. Indeed, this is how he brings both his body and mind "back." Reminding us that the actual physical act of queer sex (whether performed privately or publicly) is outlawed as sodomy in many states, Wojnarowicz cannot, ultimately, leave his body. Indeed, when he chooses to

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164 While he was losing himself in orgasm, Wojnarowicz admits of a constantly underlying anxiety that takes "the shape of another vehicle or of the cops arriving" (57).

have queer public sex there always remains the possibility that his body will be hauled into prison.

Claiming that queer subjects are "born with the cross hairs of a rifle printed on our backs or skulls," Wojnarowicz declares that "my existence is essentially outlawed before I can even come into knowledge of what my desires are or what my sensibility is" (58-59). Describing the plight of the queer subject whose desire has been classified as "immoral" by a dominant Judeo-Christian ideology that in posing as eternal truth, underwrites human laws in a monomaniacal ethical reign of terror, Wojnarowicz, however, insists that he need not heed these "fake moral screens" that government and organized religion "unfurl" before us: "They toss up a fake moral screen, nail it to the wall of a tv and newscaster's set and unfurl it like a movie screen. These fake moral backdrops are conceived at will and displayed like artifacts of the human sensibility as built by a caring god through millions of years" (58).

"I am just as capable of creating my own moral contexts" (59); Wojnarowicz insists upon the need to construct his own, counter-genealogy of queer ethical subjectivity. Here, Wojnarowicz embodies Foucault's complex theory of power in a clear and direct praxis-oriented poetic narrative.

Admitting that he's had the fantasy of murdering "the neo-nazis posing as politicians and religious



leaders" many times before, he asks himself "why [have] I never crossed the line"?

It's not that I'm a *good* person or even that I am afraid of containment in jail; it may be more that I can't escape the ropes of my own body, my own flesh, and bottom line in the pyramids of power and confinement one demon gets replaced by another in a moment's notice and no one gesture can erase it *all* that easily. (33)

Wojnarowicz declares that he does not fear the solitude of imprisonment. Yet one reason why he chooses not to murder the enemy is contained in the phrase "I can't escape the ropes of my own body, my own flesh." At face value (and in a vastly different socio-historical context), these words could easily issue from the mouth of one of the desert ascetics, for example, Saint Anthony, who also spoke of the limitless power of a different sort of demons. But does Wojnarowicz mean to echo a Christian ascesis that devalues his body?

If we read this passage as complexly echoing Foucault's famous statement in *Discipline and Punish*, "the soul is the prison of the body," we must be careful of assuming that it simply reproduces a dichotomous logic. For sure, like Foucault, Wojnarowicz neither affirms, nor simply inverts, a classical-Christian ascesis through celebration of his

embodiment. On the contrary, when he asserts that "those in power count on the fact that we are stuck inside these gravity vehicles called bodies" ("[t]he pressure that gravity sustains on our bodies keeps us crawling around in this preinvented existence"), Wojnarowicz confirms the Foucauldian premise that the body necessarily emerges from within technologies of power and subjection.

While it is clear that neither author allowed for the possibility of liberating ourselves from these inevitable forces of power, we do know that both men looked to the creative processes of thought for a possible flight from our confinement, a flight into the "limit experience" which engages the body and the mind, and, in Wojnarowicz' words, blurs their boundaries, "breaking the mental and physical barrier." Neither Foucault nor Wojnarowicz resort to redeploying a dualistic logic that would simply invert the traditional body/soul dichotomy, celebrating flesh against "spirit." Instead of affirmation, both seek negation. To understand this complex strategy, we must look to the contours of a negative ascetic tradition that endlessly defers the possibility for positivist ground, admitting that any and all discursive ground claimed by the mystical subject is only provisional.<sup>165</sup>

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165 In *Denying Divinity*, J.P. Williams describes radical apophysis in Foucauldian terms as a "commitment to limitless criticism"(9): "All possible views of the divine,

The challenge we face is to see how a negative ethics of subjectivity might nonetheless offer us a satisfying sense of agency, albeit in a form quite opposed to that authored by modern humanism.

Since Wojnarowicz and Foucault refuse to offer us an affirmative, positivistic program for "liberation," we face the challenge of grasping what counsel they *do* offer when, in the face of "the pyramids of power and confinement," as Wojnarowicz writes, "no one gesture can erase it *all* that easily."

Although both Foucault and Wojnarowicz agree that total escape from the confines of power is impossible, both insist upon the possibility for making strategic maneuvers within the dominant power structure.<sup>166</sup> Wojnarowicz, for example, insists upon the counter-cultural power of making his queer sex acts public, arguing that "[t]o make the private into something public is an action that has terrific repercussions in the preinvented world" (120-21).

According to Wojnarowicz, representations of queer public sex act like "a magnet that can attract

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therefore, are to be negated...there is no point of discursive rest: all that may be done is to undertake the process of considering concepts about the divine, provisionally affirming and then negating them, and then negating the negation too" (5).

166 Foucault insists "there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances" (96). Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, Books 1990 (1978).

others with a similar frame of reference" (121).

"Sexuality defined in images" offers Wojnarowicz and his kind "comfort in a hostile world" (120). Yet rather than affirm any personal identity (indeed, the pleasure of his queer public sex is intensified by its anonymity), Wojnarowicz' metonymic orgasm shatters the illusion of a coherent, solitary self. Simultaneously, it acts as "a dismantling tool against the illusion of ONE-TRIBE NATION; it lifts the curtains for a brief peek and reveals the probable existence of literally millions of tribes" (121).

Wojnarowicz claims that with this vision, "[t]he term 'general public' disintegrates" (121). Here he identifies the goal of his mystical experience as the creation of a queer communal space that effectively challenges the bourgeois democratic ideology of the public sphere, that enforces a sanitized and hegemonic heteronormativity.<sup>167</sup> In *Close to the Knives* Wojnarowicz provides an important document of such community in his depiction of New York City's Westside piers, now destroyed, where gay men, transgendered folk, and others roamed for sexual and social union in the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>168</sup> This queer community

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167 See *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins and "Sex in Public" by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner.

168 The existence of such counter-publics, organized around queer sexual exchange is well evidenced in the legislative move to eradicate them in New York and many other U.S.

took (and in other locations still takes) the form of what Nancy Fraser has called a "subaltern counterpublic," which she identifies as the multiple "discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, so as to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (14)<sup>169</sup>

One of the primary strategies of *Close to the Knives*--and thus queer mysticism--is to reveal the distinct need for such a queer counterdiscourse, which a mystical text can then embody. To this end, Wojnarowicz calls attention to the political debate that framed queer sexual acts during the early part of the AIDS epidemic, when the practice or even the mere desire for queer sex was labeled perverted and suicidal.<sup>170</sup> In response, Wojnarowicz fashions *Close to the Knives* as both personal testimony and political broadsheet.<sup>171</sup> Describing the homophobic rhetoric that

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cities. For an extensive discussion, see *Policing Public Sex: Queer Politics and the Future of AIDS Activism*. Eds. Dangerous Bedfellows. Boston: South End Press, 1996.

169 Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *The Phantom Public Sphere*. Ed. Bruce Robbins. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

170 Simon Watney's work provides the most comprehensive and incisive documentation of the dominant AIDS rhetoric of this period. See his *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the Media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987; See also Watney's *Practices of Freedom*.

171 Two chapters of *Close to the Knives* are called "fact sheets," providing the reader with an elaborate documentation of the sociopolitical "statistics and facts" of the AIDS epidemic in the nineteen-eighties.

circulated throughout the early years of the AIDS epidemic, Wojnarowicz says:

Not only do we have to contend with bonehead newscasters and conservative members of the medical profession telling us to "just say no" to sexuality rather than talk about safer sex possibilities, but we have people from the thought police spilling out from the ranks with admonitions that we shouldn't *think* about anything other than monogamous or safer sex. I'm beginning to believe that one of the last frontiers left for radical gesture is the imagination. At least in my ungoverned imagination I can fuck somebody without a rubber, or, I can, in the privacy of my own skull, douse [Senator Jesse] Helms with a bucket of gasoline and set his putrid ass on fire or throw congressman William Dannemeyer off the empire state building. (120)

Wojnarowicz' confrontation with social, systemic violence defines his experience as a gay man living with AIDS in the Reagan-era United States. Crucially, his systemically-directed anger, anger fueled by public and legislative debates that espouse a conservative cultural asceticism in response to the AIDS epidemic, is one of the main somatic triggers for his queer mystical experience, causing him to leave his body and enter into a visionary landscape. This visionary

landscape conveys a particularly queer cosmography, where two worlds exist simultaneously:

First there is the World. Then there is the Other World. The Other World is where I lose my footing. In its calendar turnings, in its preinvented existence. The barrage of twists and turns where I sometimes get weary trying to keep up with it, minute by minute adapt: the world of the stoplight, the no-smoking signs, the rental world, the split-rail fencing shielding hundreds of miles of barren wilderness from the human step. (87-88)

This "preinvented" "Other World" is a "packaged" and "bought-up" world (87-88), the "world of language, the world of lies," where Wojnarowicz has "always felt like an alien" (88). Claiming that "[w]e are born into a preinvented existence within a tribal nation of zombies," Wojnarowicz holds nonetheless that "in that illusion of a one-tribe nation there are real tribes" who have not "bought the con of language," and are not "too fucking exhausted or fearful to break through the illusion and examine the structures of their world" (37-38). Indeed, these "real tribe" members "experience the X ray of Civilization every time they leave the house or turn on the tv or radio or pick up a newspaper" (38).

They also understand what freedom truly is and if the other tribes want to hand them the illusion of

hope in the form of the leash—in the form of language—like all stray dogs with intelligence from experience, they know how to turn the leash into a rope to exit the jail windows or how to turn the leash into a noose to hang the jailers (38).

*Close to the Knives* should be understood as precisely such a “noose” fashioned from the “leash” of language. Wojnarowicz positions his mystical text then as precisely a counter-hegemonic one. Recounting his mystic-visionary experience in narrative form to help himself and others escape the prison of the “preinvented existence,” Wojnarowicz offers us *Close to the Knives* as a guide to a queer ascesis he claims is accessible “through the keys of the imagination” (88). However this use of the imagination is not simply a non-material activity of fantasy: through it, Wojnarowicz insists, “one adapts and stretches the boundaries of the Other [preinvented] world (88). The queer mystic “stretches” these boundaries by publicly embodying and enacting a politics of queer pleasure that rides orgasmic waves of transcendence, yet always keeps a clear eye and voice trained on the heteronormative forces that would deny queer pleasure, whether publicly or privately pursue



## Conclusion: Capitalism and the Politics of a Queer Asceticism

Two years ago, before I was able to complete this dissertation, I moved from Austin to Los Angeles to take up a full time teaching position. Within the first week of my arrival in LA, and naturally while driving a car, I was confronted by a huge advertisement for Apple Computers that featured Mohandas Gandhi, in a simple white dhoti, traversing a street.<sup>172</sup> He was clutching something, perhaps an umbrella or a cane. Although the ad was as huge as a city building, indeed, it was momentous, I was unable to discern what was in his grasp. I imagined, with a smile, that somehow it was a laptop computer, anachronistically inserted into his hands through the miracles of postmodern photographic technology.

Of course I had seen this ad before, but never before so large.<sup>173</sup> Its position, in the center of downtown LA, and the timing of when it confronted me--I was nearly finished with my dissertation on asceticism (or so I thought), and hence completely immersed in the

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172 The dhoti, or traditional men's garb, and the handspun cloth from which it was made, is of course a potent symbol of Gandhi's direct opposition to India's enslavement to the economics of British Imperialism. Gandhi advocated India's return to pre-capitalist--hence, pre-colonial, methods of economic self-sufficiency. Gandhi founded this movement on the call for a return to individual households making homespun cloth from local materials. See Gandhi's *My Experiment with Truth*.

173 This ad campaign for Apple Computers exhorts its audience to "think different" and features photographs of such deceased public figures as Gandhi, Albert Einstein, and John Lennon.

subject, stimulated me. This ad suggested itself as a perfect image with which to begin my concluding remarks. I knew that I wanted to address the inherently odd place of asceticism, at least in its more traditional guise, within contemporary, late capitalist society.

And here it was. What better way to capture and communicate the inherent incongruity of the ancient tradition of asceticism, or self discipline and self denial, in a society so wholly devoted to an endless self-affirmation, achievable through the ceaseless activity of hedonistic mass consumption?

The ad clearly constructs an imagined relationship between Apple Computers and Gandhi's own, widely celebrated brand of asceticism, but of what exact sort? In exhorting us to "think different," the ad does appear to offer us the possibility of something like an ascesis of intellectual self-transformation. And when one reads Gandhi's autobiography, one can see that his asceticism was certainly both an intellectual and physical process of self-transformation; however, for Gandhi and his followers, this task was incredibly arduous, and continuous. The ad, on the other hand, suggests that in today's postmodern moment the effort to "think different" may be as simple to achieve as driving into the mall and pulling out a credit card.<sup>174</sup>

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174 According to Ji Wei Ci, "the coming together of capitalism and asceticism as if they shared the same ends, as if the striving for innerworldly and for worldly goods was one and

The irony only deepens when we consider that Gandhi's strategy of individual and collective asceticism was, from its very inception, interwoven with a radical socialist Indian national politics of economic self-sufficiency, posed against British socioeconomic imperialism. Of course, the ad erases these specific details in its slick, aesthetic co-optation of Gandhi's image. Removing Gandhi from his historical, national, and political context, it proffers him to us as a poster boy for the brave new world of transglobal capitalism.<sup>175</sup> How ironic.

This ad, I would argue, warns us against rushing to embrace the possibility of a postmodern form of asceticism without careful inquiry first.

Although my dissertation does argue that we embrace a contemporary queer asceticism, a form which no doubt emerges from within the postmodern conditions of late capitalism, I must underscore the uneasy position of the homosexual subject within contemporary Western consumer society.

In "Capitalism and Gay Identity," John D'Emilio identifies capitalism as the "structure" that "made

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the same thing, was a historical accident" (302. "Disenchantment, Desublimation, and Some Cultural Conjunctions of Capitalism," *New Literary History*, 1999.

<sup>175</sup> Although my dissertation does not explore Eastern asceticism, I would argue that as it pertains to the contemporary Western capitalist appropriation of Eastern forms and traditions of asceticism, the image the ad presents is, unfortunately, largely an accurate one.

possible the emergence of a gay identity and the creation of urban gay communities" (473).<sup>176</sup> The capitalist invention of wage labor, D'Emilio argues, permits the individual to construct a life independent, outside the family structure. He reminds us, however, of the paradoxical nature of capitalism's ideological apparatus. While its economic conditions create a comfortable environment for the homosexual, its ideological conditions do not always.

D'Emilio's essay is now twenty years old. The times have clearly changed. If you go to your local IKEA today, you're likely to see prominently displayed ads featuring gay couples homemaking just like their heterosexual brothers and sisters. The ideological conditions of capitalism are clearly evolving to accept the gay and lesbian consumer into the fold.

As gays and lesbians become recognized as a consumer force, they do begin to enjoy a certain amount of qualified tolerance. Certain aspects of their culture can even enjoy a wide popularity. Disco. "Will and Grace." Such acceptance obviously comes at a price.

Many queer activists are unwilling to pay. They would rather cultivate pleasures, identities and communal spaces that defy the heteronormative pressures of capitalist ideology.

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176 John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*.

Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant describe the pleasures--and dangers--of queer public sex in precisely this manner. At the end of their seminal essay, they describe the performance of just such a queer public sex act. They are part of the audience who have gathered in a gay bar that hosts an alternative night which features sex performances. That night the feature is "erotic vomiting."

Their description of the erotic "dynamic" that the couple performing the act share is intense. They stress the fact that the audience--them included--share in this erotic bond:

The crowd is transfixed by the scene of intimacy and display, control and abandon, ferocity and abjection. People are moaning softly with admiration, then whistling, stomping, screaming, encouragements. They have pressed forward in a compact and intimate group. (565)

Here is unmistakably the scene of a contemporary performance of queer asceticism. If we looked at the participation of the audience alone, we would no doubt be reminded of a crowd of worshippers at a revival meeting, perhaps cheering on some sinner who has shaken off his terrible sin. Perhaps not.

But the specificity of queer asceticism demands that we look at the act being performed, erotic vomiting. The dialectical nature of the pleasure being enacted and experienced

is of the essence here. I see a similar dynamic at work in Pat Califia's description of herself at a party fisting a gay man. The essay is in her book *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*. Pat tells us that gay men into fisting really like her size. I guess they are fist "size queens."

Annie Sprinkle has written an account of her "first time" having sex with Linda/Les Nichols, a female to male transsexual, who is a surgically-made hermaphrodite.<sup>177</sup> It's an incredible story. Annie narrates the experience of using Les' brand-new penis in her inimitable, "gee-whiz" style. She is truly unflappable. She's really turned on by Les. He's shot for her, too. To get Les' penis hard, they insert a plastic rod into it, that they've just cut to size using a kitchen knife. As it turns out, Les' penis is still a little too fragile to use that night. Even though they have to forgo its centrality to let it heal first, they still have really hot sex, says Annie.

Annie is featured in another act of queer asceticism that I like. This act is filmed; it's entitled: "A 25 Year Old Gay Man Loses His Virginity to a Woman." Made by Phillip B. Roth, who at the time was a member of ACT-UP, it features a gay man-- well, just look at the title again. This queer ascetic act is a little different than the previous one I described. The filmmaker, Roth, isn't interested in the goal of sexual pleasure, per se. As he frames the experience, throughout the film, it is mostly an intellectual one, analytic in scope. He

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<sup>177</sup> Annie Sprinkle, "My First Time with a F2M-Transsexual-Surgically-Made-Hermaphrodite," *Discontents: New Queer Writers*. Dennis Cooper, ed. (1992).

talks to Annie a lot about the different sensations he is experiencing; he asks her lots of questions. At a certain point it looks like Annie just wants him to shut up and fuck her, but that's not what he's about. And he's making the film.

Del La Grace Volcano, like Les Nichols, a female to male transsexual, came to the Austin Gay and Lesbian Film Festival a few years ago and I was lucky enough to see her presentation. He's pretty damn sexy. Very aggressive, and in your face. I admired that, found it hot. Les showed a short piece of a video that he hadn't completed yet, featuring him and another f2m friend looking for and then having sex in a gay public cruising ground with other gay men around, watching and cruising them.

All of these acts are ascetic because they push at secure definitional boundaries that demarcate and police identities, bodies and and pleasures. They involve a kind of intention and focus that could be described as sacred. Indeed, this is true for both their participants and audience, though hard and fast distinctions between the two are blurred, as are other binarisms.

Such queer asceticism is experiencing a current flowering, I would argue. It doesn't depend upon being accepted by capitalist ideology and its consumerist logic. In fact, these acts of queer asceticism are most frequently poised against the

heteronormativity enforced by consumer ideology. But that's another story.<sup>178</sup>

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See Matias Viegner, "The Only Haircut that Makes Sense Anymore": Queer Subculture and Gay Resistance," *Queer Looks*, ed. by Greyson, et. al. NY: Routledge, 1993.



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