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**Embodied Resistance:
A Historiographic Intervention into the
Performance of Queer Violence**

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Dedication

This work is lovingly dedicated to my mother,

Adriana Dorsey:

first teacher / best teacher.

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This dissertation compares select moments of violence in queer history to their theatrical counterparts to investigate how perceptions and representations of violence shape queer lives. Though many scholars have already written about the queer dramatic canon, few have focused on the ways that violence functions within these plays structurally, thematically, or as integral part of the theatre-going experience. In addition to considering how past productions have configured these acts, my project describes how violence can be staged in resistant, critical ways that can both contribute to historiography and affect society at large. These enactments of history have the potential to exceed and overturn stereotypes of mere victimhood, and instead illustrate how queer subjects can and do assert their claim on America's past and present.

In my first chapter, I examine *As Time Goes By* (1977), *Street Theater* (1982), *Stonewall: Night Variations* (1994), and *Harvey Milk* (1995), all works that invoke the 1969 Stonewall riots, an incident that has become synonymous with the rise of the gay

and lesbian movement in America. My second chapter explores gay martyrdom as a representational trope in Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi* (1998), as well as in diverse works about Harvey Milk (*The Harvey Milk Show* [1991] and *Harvey Milk* [1995]) and Matthew Shepard (*The Laramie Project* [2000], *Anatomy of a Hate Crime* [2001], and *The Matthew Shepard Story* [2002]), men whose tragic deaths rendered them complex symbols for queer communities. In my third chapter, I detail the labor of queer street patrols and the Pink Pistols, real-life activist groups that have mobilized the threat of queer violence to combat anti-gay violence. I contrast their dynamic strategies to those imagined theatrically in *The West Street Gang* (1977) and *Lesbians Who Kill* (1992).

Throughout this dissertation, I develop and offer a theory for staging these complicated moments of pain, protest, rage, and resistance, with the belief that (re)staging history is pivotal to the understanding and ongoing negotiation of these events and identities.

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Introduction: Queerness, Violence, Historiography, Practice

This dissertation was inspired by an odd moment in my life in which my theatrical practice, my critical thinking, and my sexual identity were unexpectedly and unwillingly called into convergence. In July of 2002, I attended the Society of American Fight Director's three-week National Stage Combat Workshop for the first time. I was looking forward to nothing more than a full roster of introductory courses that would improve my acting and movement skills, as well as force me to get about ten hours of exercise a day. This workshop was meant to be my summer break, my vacation from the intense scholarship and requisite brainy-ness that my graduate program demanded. Because I would soon be living and training with a group of one hundred complete strangers, I was looking to blend in; I had made the conscious decision to leave my "silence=death" t-shirt and other queer fashion accessories at home. I was heading to this workshop in Las Vegas as an actor, not as a scholar and certainly not as a homosexual. Having thus compartmentalized my various identities, I thought I was ready for anything.

Though it's a gross generalization, while I was at the workshop I learned that much of the punching that is done in stage combat is "non-contact," meaning that one actor doesn't actually hit the other, though the audience is made to think so through an array of acting and choreographic techniques. When fighting for film and television, however, actors are often asked to physically make contact with one another. Though the blow can be softened to a degree, a punch to the stomach is often just that – one actor punching the other in the stomach. In my first film fighting class, I was having a hard time differentiating between these two vastly different approaches. Because I was being cautious not to hurt a partner I had just met and begun working with, many of my

punches to my partner's stomach either didn't make contact, or only did so lightly, a fact that could be hidden from a live audience but that a camera would undoubtedly pick up on. The instructor, who happened to be the founder of the Society, noticed what I was doing and bellowed at me from across the room, "Just fucking hit him! He can take it! Aw, come on... You're fighting like a God damn queer!"

In the moment, of course, I was horrified. Publicly shamed, I spent the remainder of class working very hard not to "fight like a queer," or perhaps, just not to be noticed. After class, as I began to process the comment, I tried to remember that his instruction wasn't meant to be mean-spirited; it stemmed, in fact, from his desire to improve my performance skills. Other students who had worked with him before assured me that it was just his nature; his colleagues rolled their eyes when they heard about the story, but forgave him for his lack of tact and political correctness because of his age and because of his history with the organization. And I realized that the instructor didn't know me from the next person, and so with his accusation wasn't targeting me based on who I was, but rather on his own associative interpretation of what I was or wasn't doing. All in all, his critique said much more about him than it did me.

None of this stopped me from wondering what he meant by "fighting like a God damn queer." Was he trying to articulate that queers are weak when they fight, or that they're incompetent, somehow fighting "wrong?" Does queerness suggest an unwillingness to fight? Was there some longstanding historical stereotype about the nature of gays and lesbians fighting that I wasn't aware of? As much as I tried to read his comment otherwise, I couldn't help but think that there was something corrective in it beyond just theatrical practice. After all, "don't fight like a queer" isn't that far divorced

semantically from “don’t be a queer.” Unfortunately, by not addressing his comment at the time, I allowed him to define what queerness meant, both for me, and for the rest of the class. In retrospect, this moment tied violence and queer identity together for me in a very personal way. Almost in penance for not having challenged his critique, much of my scholarship and theatrical practice over the last five years have been aimed at trying to determine what it means to fight like a queer. That question, though not the explicit domain of this project, has caused me continuously to study occasions in the past and the present, onstage and off, where violence and queerness overlap.

In Embodied Resistance: A Historiographic Intervention into the Performance of Queer Violence, I compare select moments of violence in queer history to their theatrical counterparts to investigate how perceptions and representations of violence shape queer lives. Countless scholars of gay and lesbian history have written nuanced accounts of regimes of oppression or of moments and movements of political uprising – of fighting back. Oddly though, few of these historians have examined in any detail the nature of such violence, or how queer subjects define themselves in relationship to it. Similarly, theatre scholars have frequently analyzed the plays that rehearse these same moments in queer history, yet few have focused on the ways that violence functions within these plays structurally, thematically, or as integral part of the theatre-going experience. Historians and theatre practitioners alike are in the business of telling stories about gay and lesbian lives; my goal is to work toward an understanding of how and why violence is so often a part of these narratives. Throughout this dissertation, I explore the often overlooked minutiae of queer violence, both as it is performed in the streets and on the stage. Ultimately, this dissertation recognizes that we live in a violent world, and that

withdrawing from thinking critically about violence does not render one immune to its effects.

This project is both polemical and programmatic. I advocate for an approach to history that challenges conventional interpretations of the past, just as I advocate for an approach to theatrical practice that challenges conventional portrayals of history. In both cases, I argue that violence can and must be approached as a richly signifying and previously untapped site of inquiry and meaning making. In addition to a historiography that calls for a clearer understanding of the nature of violence, this project articulates the need for a more careful representation of violence as it intersects with queer lives in the theatre. I conclude each chapter with my own ideas about how violence can be staged in counternormative ways, not just as spectacle or as plot device, but such that it can question the centrality of violence to queer lives. By focusing on intersections of violence and queerness onstage and off, this dissertation actively resists – that is, fights – how dominant society obscures queer access and visibility to violence and power.

Historically, the word “queer” has been invoked in a myriad of ways, and I purposefully use this ambiguous term because of its highly contested and politically loaded meanings, all of which converge with violence. First and foremost, I use “queer” as a catch-all term to refer collectively to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons – essentially, people with non-heterosexual identities. Though this use of the term is convenient, it can also serve to elide differences of gender and race. For instance, in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, Michael Warner notes that “queer” is “a way of cutting against mandatory gender divisions, though gender continues to be a dividing line” (xxvi). I recognize that men and

women are targeted differently by violence, just as I understand that gender is always visible in embodied representations, performances, and enactments. Much the same can be said of how race is all too easily subsumed in discussions of queerness, though again, is always a presence onstage. Yet within this project, I operate under the belief that Scott Bravmann describes in *Queer Fictions of the Past: History, Culture, Difference*: “our queerness connects us in ways that do not exist in straight worlds” (21).

“Queer” has also long carried connotations of the strange, different, bizarre, or counternormative. Related to these meanings, “queer” has had a long history as a part of hate speech – as an insult, critique, or judgment of an individual or a group’s aesthetic or lifestyle. Some (but by no means, all) gays and lesbians have sought to forcefully reclaim “queer” as a self-selected identity marker, a taking pride in the refusal to act or to be as society dictates. Such a project is haunted, of course, by the past and present use of the term as invective. In “‘Spoiled Identity’: Stephen Gordon’s Loneliness and the Difficulties of Queer History,” Heather K. Love writes, “The word *queer*, like *fag* or *dyke* but unlike the more positive *gay* or *lesbian*, incorporates the history of stigma and homophobic abuse into the name of the discipline. [. . .] Critics still struggle with a fundamental paradox of queer criticism: how to incorporate a difficult or shameful past into the vision of a more promising future” (492). I’ve elected to use “queer” throughout this dissertation precisely because of its vexed and challenging history, a constant reminder of both violence and resistance to violence.

In addition, “queer” has also come to be defined as a doing; “queering” something indicates its observance or practice in counter-normative ways. This act of interpretation or practice, an operation open and useful to anyone regardless of sexual orientation, finds

new pleasures and significance through ostensibly “straight” texts and actions. This use of “queer,” then, can take on meaning only tangentially related to sexual identity. As Warner suggests, “[f]or both academics and activists, ‘queer’ gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual” (xxvi). Throughout this dissertation, I describe “queer” uses of violence in recent history – ways that violence is refigured from the norm or carried out with a difference. My end goal in this project is the articulation of a theory of performing violence queerly, a description of ways that stage combat might be productively revisited within the theatre to better achieve meaning within an artwork. Though within the scope of this project I look primarily to plays with gay and lesbian characters, I believe such a re-visioning of stage combat practices has applications for all representations of violence, regardless of the sexuality of the characters, actors, or the overall theme of the play. I’m inspired by Jill Dolan’s analysis of this variant on “queer” in *Geographies of Learning: Theory and Practice, Activism and Performance*: “Queerness becomes a place to which people can travel to, find pleasure, and knowledge, and maybe (or maybe not) power” (97). Even as I demonstrate the tremendous stakes of reconsidering violence and the political efficacy of queerly practicing history and performance, I admit that the writing of this dissertation has been a deeply joyful process, an aspect of this work that I hope will call others to engage critically with such issues and activism.

Violence is a term which in casual parlance can quite literally mean everything or nothing, and so my dissertation champions the need to recuperate the term in scholarly, critical, and popular discourse. I also hope to labor towards overturning pervasive and conservative notions that all representations of violence are inherently harmful to society;

representations can be the cause of violence, true, but I also believe that they can work toward its cure. The examples that I cite express the generative potential of performed violence – fight choreography can be pedagogical, inspirational, and cathartic.

When violence is examined in literature, performance, or even public discourse, it is often investigated in less than critical ways. Indeed, many pundits and scholars talk about violence without defining it, a suspect rhetorical practice that belies a sort of “I can’t explain it, but I know it when I see it” mentality. Predictably, some of the most precise definitional labor on violence has gone on in the discipline of sociology. In “Violence in Social Life,” Mary L. Jackman arrives at a useful “generic definition,” suggesting that violence consists of “[a]ctions that inflict, threaten, or cause injury. Actions may be corporal, written, or verbal. Injuries may be corporal, psychological, material, or social” (405). Her definition is striking because it suggests the incredible range of violence of which humans are capable. Though within this dissertation, I primarily look at physical acts done intentionally that cause physical damage (as well as their representations), I find that Jackman’s definition is instructive as to the host of ways that people can cause harm. Importantly, Jackman says that “not all acts of violence meet with uniform interpretations within the same culture. [. . .] Perpetrators and others from their group have an interest in denying or obscuring the violence [. . .], [v]ictims and their allies have an interest in emphasizing or exaggerating the incidence” (404). Jackman’s analysis impels me to locate my own bias writing this dissertation as a gay man invested in progressive politics. I admit that throughout my interpretation of historical events in this project, I am more invested in the diverse ways that queers respond to violence or

themselves command it than I am with further documenting the ways in which queers have been subjected to it.

Important work has been done in diverse fields theorizing the relationship between anti-gay violence and power. In particular, Gail Mason's gender studies-based *The Spectacle of Violence: Homophobia, Gender, and Knowledge* addresses homophobic violence in relation to broader social contexts. She writes:

I prefer the term *homophobia-related violence* to the more common *homophobic violence*. As I shall argue, anti-homosexual sentiment is rarely the sole explanation for the violence that lesbians or gay men report. Not only is homophobia itself infused with assumptions about gender, but the enactment and experience of such violence is also shaped by other specificities and differences, such as those of race, age, and class. (6)

Though I use terminology such as "homophobic violence," "anti-gay violence," and "hate crimes" almost interchangeably throughout this dissertation, I do so with the understanding that violence is almost always motivated by more than just sexual identity. Following Michel Foucault, Mason describes how "one of the legacies of homophobia-related violence is found in the marks of vulnerability that it leaves on the bodies of lesbian and gay men. Such violence makes a statement that to be homosexual is to be 'in danger' of violence and other forms of hostility" (116). While it would be impossible (and perhaps, undesirable) to completely erase such associations between violence and queer bodies, the goal of my historiographic and theatrical work in this dissertation is to labor toward overwriting such definitive associations, or at least, to augment them with alternate vantage points. One such vista, though not necessarily a hopeful one for

humanity, is provided by Judith Butler in a lecture on human rights following 9/11 titled “Global Violence, Sexual Politics.” She writes,

Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something. [. . .] In the United States, we are everywhere now surrounded with violence, of having perpetrated it, having suffered it, living in fear of it, planning more of it. Violence is surely a touch of the worst order, in which the human vulnerability to other humans is exposed in its most terrifying way, in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another, in which life itself can be expunged by the willful action of another. (200, 202)

Butler’s comments, in tandem with Mason’s, articulate that we are all marked (to varying degrees) as vulnerable to violence as part of the human condition. Though this dissertation concentrates specifically on finding ways to imagine different configurations of violence for queers, this fact doesn’t supersede my greater desire for less violence in society all around.

To return to my title, then, “queer violence” is meant to signify multiply, gesturing at once to violence carried out by and against gays and lesbians, as well as reemphasizing Butler’s analysis of the overall absurdity of violence in society. Yet despite Butler’s articulation of the intrinsically peculiar nature of violence, many of the specifics of violent acts have become all too familiar. One need only turn on the television or open a history book to see countless instances of punching, slapping, kicking, and name-calling. The “queer violence” in my title also signifies numerous uncommon kinds of violence or reactions to violence. For example, at the Stonewall

riots, one of the case studies I explore in great detail in this dissertation, many drag queens responded to police brutality by forming a chorus line and singing. Certainly, the use of song and dance is a queer response to physical violence. But in that the display was intended (in part) to belittle the cops, it could also be considered an act of violence according to Jackman's broad definition of the term. Furthermore, the drag queens' performative act of singing about their own sexual identities might be seen as threateningly violent according to numerous "discourses that characterise homosexuality as a danger to others" (Mason 116). Many theorists discuss "coming out" as a resistant act; this dissertation celebrates "coming out" and the decision to live an authentic, public life as a necessary and exciting act of queer violence against heteronormative and homophobic individuals, societies, and ideologies.

The "historiographic intervention" of my title gestures towards my own background as a theatre historian, and my desire to trace the interactions between queer history, performance, and violence. In each of my chapters, I study the time period of my case studies, looking at how various violent events, people, and themes have been documented. I also undertake a historiographic intervention into plays that dramatize these events, people, and themes; I examine not just what aspects of these historical objects are conveyed to an audience, but how they are selected and structured to make meaning. Finally, I argue that the performance of violence in artworks can itself make meaning outside of the theatre by causing people to reassess their memory or understanding of such an event. Like many queer scholars, I am skeptical about traditional methods of history that seek to explain its objects neatly, to offer up one dominant or comprehensive interpretation of the event. Such a nervousness stems in part

from many years of gays and lesbians being kept out of traditional histories, but also from a queer aesthetic of appreciating multiple (and often contradictory) views of any given object of study. I've always been fond of former Soviet Union leader Nikita Khrushchev's famous observance that "historians are dangerous people. They are capable of upsetting everything." Like many queer historiographers, my own intentions toward conventional history are part mischievous and part malicious; I hope to upset simple or essentialist histories in favor of dense, intricate, rich, and compelling imaginings of the past – those that mirror the always complex nature of the present.

French philosopher, historian, and cultural theorist Michel Foucault has been instrumental to my own strategies of exploring history. His corpus of theory has been foundational to the relatively new discipline of queer studies; he has also offered much to literary studies, New Historicism, and cultural studies. In particular, his 1971 essay, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," is useful to the "historiographical intervention" aspect of my project. In it, he follows and expands upon the idea of "genealogy," German philosopher Fredrick Nietzsche's process of describing the present via examining the dynamics of power that have led to its production. Foucault's genealogy "opposes itself to the search for 'origins'" (77) and counters traditional history with "effective" (*wirkliche*) history (88), a mode of historical analysis that looks to the body for evidence, values and observes reversals of power and chance occurrences, and affirms knowledge as only a perspective. He believed that "the purpose of history, guided by genealogy, is not to discover the roots of our identity, but to commit itself to its dissipation" (95). Every chapter of my dissertation chronicles such a moment (or series of moments) wherein power structures are reversed. My overarching project, following Foucault, is

the dissolution of simplistic narratives of identity and violence, for example, the common assumption that the gay and liberation movement was born through violence at the Stonewall riots.

American historian and literary critic Hayden White has also provided much of the theoretical background for my “historiographical intervention.” Like Foucault, he argues eloquently for the need to rethink the traditional role of history and the historian: “A specifically *historical inquiry* is born less of the necessity to establish *that* certain events occurred than what certain events might *mean* for a given group, society, or culture’s conceptions of its present tasks and future prospects” (“Historical Pluralism” 487). In *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (1978), White characterizes the historian’s work as akin to that of a storyteller, transferring historic events into manageable narratives replete with plot, characters, and themes. This is the work that I do throughout my dissertation, but also the (often unconscious) methodology of those into whose accounts I historiographically intervene. For instance, I describe the ways that many accounts of Harvey Milk and Matthew Shepard’s lives unconsciously play into tropes of martyrdom, an interpretive phenomenon that I feel says more about those telling the story than it does about Milk and Shepard. In *Tropics of Discourse*, White writes, “Histories, then, are not only about events but also about the possible sets of relationships that those events can be demonstrated to figure” (*Tropics* 94). White’s conception of history grants me the freedom not to focus exclusively on the factual information attached to these events, people, and themes, and instead allows me to notice and play with the intersections of sexual identity and violence that often function as the narrative spine to these stories.

My appreciation and applications of Foucault and White's theories in this dissertation aren't meant to suggest that either is only useful when examining gay and lesbian subjects. Though when juxtaposed to traditional formulations of history, both Foucault and White's historiographic methods might be judged queer (in the counternormative sense), all of Foucault's theoretical work and most of White's predated even the articulation of "queer theory" as a discipline in the early 1990s. Furthermore, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender lives have often been written about through conventional historical lenses, among them Randy Shilts's excellent 1982 biography, *The Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, and David Carter's thorough 2004 study, *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution*. Though I find such works essential to my own analysis of queer history, my own process is more closely aligned with the work of queer historiographers.

For instance, I draw methodological inspiration from David Román's *Performance in America: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the Performing Arts*. In a chapter titled "Archival Drag: or, the Afterlife of Performance," he describes Sarah Siddons, one of the most famous actresses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as someone who we have "no direct access to," nothing beyond "images and textual descriptions" (145). Following Foucault and White's charge to reconfigure the way we conceive of history, Román traces a true genealogy of performance, indicating relatedness (but not causality or linearity) between Siddons, film-star Bette Davis's diva turn in *All About Eve*, and the drag shows of American actor David Pierce. Román's analysis concentrates less on Siddons' accomplishments than on what and how her legacy has meant to subsequent generations. He concludes

that theatrical performance lives not only in the memory of those who witness it but also in the vestiges, artifacts, and performances that survive into a later cultural moment where they might be reembodyed by other actors and received by other audiences. Such performances help shape a history that exceeds the traditional archival systems of the museum, the library, or the university. This history endures and is passed on through performances that archive the past even as they restage and reimagine it. (173-174)

This unconventional sort of archive is essential to our current understanding of the Stonewall riots, for example, a chaotic and violent event to which we also have no direct access – no videos, sound recordings, or photographs – but which has had a rich and historically significant afterlife in performance. Over the last thirty-eight years, there have been two radio re-enactments created and broadcast in 1977 and 1989 (respectively), two different live re-enactments by the Radical Faeries in 1989 and 1994, a 1995 film directed by Nigel Finch called *Stonewall* based on Martin Duberman’s book of the same name, and a host of plays, performance art, musicals, and operas that have featured or been about Stonewall that premiered in 1975, 1977, 1982, 1989, 1990, (two in) 1994, 1995, and 2007. With Román’s methodology, such a dense archive can render a complex understanding of the centrality of the Stonewall riots to the ways that queer citizens have represented and understood their own heritage through the years. This Stonewall archive also makes me inclined to agree with Jill Dolan’s analysis of queer theatre in *Geographies of Learning*: “Our theater is our historiography; it encompasses

our past, present, and future; our practice writes our history, in sedimented forms that converge in our cultural productions. Theater is our cultural memory” (99).

Charlotte Canning’s 2004 article, “Feminist Performance as Feminist Historiography,” has been formative to my conception of the progressive potential of the performance of history. In response to *Theater Survey* editor Jody Enders’s guiding question, “What is the single most important thing we can do to bring theatre history into the new millennium?” (174) Canning offers a model for performances that blends historiography and dramaturgy. She writes,

The argument I make here is for performance that foregrounds historiographical operations, making physical, gestural, emotional, and agonistic the processes that construct history out of the past.

Concomitantly, I am arguing for history that overtly acknowledges the ways in which it is a performance of the past, but not the past itself. (227)

Canning’s work prompts me to again foreground my preference for historical accounts that don’t position themselves as authoritative, a predilection that perhaps speaks to my discomfort in the theatre while watching “documentary” performances that position themselves as presenting “actual” history. Throughout this dissertation, I build a theory for the staging of violence in historical drama that reflects both the nature of violence in queer lives and the historiography of the event, character, or theme that I’m investigating. Though I understand that performances of history are rarely “held up as a legitimate mode of historiography” (230), like Canning, I believe that in such performances “the historiography is as revealing as the history itself” (232). Canning’s essay, in addition to helping shape my aesthetic for performed violence, caused me to recognize that I was

only able to remain invested in at least a dozen versions of the Stonewall riots because of the dynamic and disparate ways that they approached the historiography of the same event.

Judith Halberstam's vision for the future of queer historiography is also central to my project. In her book, *In a Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, she explains that the "project of subcultural historiography demands that we look at the silences, the gaps, and the ruptures in the spaces of performance, and that we use them to tell disorderly narratives" (187). More often than not, there are gaps surrounding the intersections of queerness and violence, and in this dissertation, my goal is to uncover them. Though I've spoken about progressive politics elsewhere in this introduction, I find it important to highlight that I am not writing a narrative of progress; beginning with the Stonewall riots in my first chapter is not meant to indicate that that event changed the way that every queer throughout time would be able to access violence as a strategy for resistance. My historical project is not exhaustive, but rather, a collection of polysemous moments of rupture that I choose to call to the foreground as I leapfrog through queer history. Similarly, my engagement with plays and performances is not meant to establish a queer dramatic canon or to reiterate an already existing one. Instead I use these works to tell disorderly narratives about how violence is integrated into both the gay and lesbian past and the queer present. Furthermore, I believe, as José Esteban Muñoz writes in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, that "the stage [. . .] is a venue for performances that allow the spectators access to queer life-worlds that exist, importantly and dialectically, within the future and the present" (198). I am

hopeful that this dissertation will enable us to bring our understanding of a queerly violent past into the present and beyond.

The “embodied resistance” of my title marks my desire not only to describe, remember, and celebrate historical resistance to anti-gay violence and oppression, but also to advocate for a practice of resistance within the theatre, a refusal to continue staging violence ahistorically, especially in plays about history. I find the use of violence merely as plot device or as spectacle to be both uninteresting and reductive. Violence is always a product of a distinct sociopolitical moment, and to stage violence without at least gesturing to the complicated historical causes and effects of violence does a grave disservice to those who have suffered from it, or struggled to resist it. Gail Mason asks, “[C]an we draw a line between what violence may, and may not do? If so, how?” (110). I believe that representation is an important answer to her question; we can begin to draw such a line by staging historical moments of the intersections of queerness and violence to reveal the nature of violence itself. Throughout this dissertation, I develop and offer a theory for staging these complicated moments of pain, protest, rage, and resistance, with the belief that (re)staging history is pivotal to the understanding and ongoing negotiation of these events and queer identities. In doing so, I hope to locate performed violence as another way that worlds can be made, that imaginations can be harnessed, and, as Dolan suggests, that “utopias can be glimpsed” (*Utopia*).

Recent trends in staging violence in the theatre have tended to follow patterns of fight choreography for film and television. Many audiences today are well-versed in a visual vocabulary of violence thanks to Hollywood’s blockbuster action films, as well as television marathons of *C.S.I.* and *Law and Order*. In a desperate attempt to stage

violence for an audience that already thinks it knows what violence should look like, many fight choreographers and directors have labored toward making violence more realistic onstage, all too often bankrupting it of any thematic significance and reducing it to pure spectacle. Throughout this dissertation, I maintain that traditional modes of representing violence such as realism are antithetical to effective history.

My own aesthetic for representing violence, then, is to find ways to use a theatrical language to stage violence to actually be about the nature of violence, both as it has operated within queer lives historically and in the present. I have taken great comfort in the work of Antonin Artaud, Augusto Boal, and Anne Bogart, all director/theorists dedicated to shaking up conventional modes of rehearsal and representation. Yet my clearest source for techniques on using theatre to affect social change has been twentieth-century German playwright/director/theorist Bertolt Brecht, who famously rejected unified production concepts in favor of critically distancing his audiences from his plays. In “A Model for Epic Theatre,” he describes his theory for the “Alienation Effect” (alternately, the A-effect, *V-Effekt Verfremdungseffekt*):

Briefly, it has to do with a technique which confers on the human events to be presented the stamp of the conspicuous, of something requiring an explanation, something not obvious, not simply natural. The aim of the A-effect is to make of the spectator an active critic of society. (240)

Brecht accomplished this by scripting episodic dramas that alternated between dialogue, songs, and narration; when staging these plays, he allowed each unit of design to operate independently, forcing the audience to make meaning from the disparate elements they saw. Brecht demanded that theatre confess the means of its production, often by

revealing the mechanisms of design technology, such as leaving lighting instruments in full view of the audience. His overall aesthetic has shaped mine, leading me to believe that theatre about history also must find ways to confess to the means of its historical production.

I remain convinced that using Brecht's theories to stage frank conversations about the serious subject of violence in queer lives doesn't preclude creating moments of productive theatricality, wonder, and joy. In "Flying the Angel of History," Martin Harries works to resolve the tension between the Brechtian notion that "the theater must cease to be magical in order to become critical" and Tony Kushner's stage directions for his *Angels in America*: "the moments of magic [. . .] are to be fully realized, as bits of wonderful *theatrical* illusion—which means it's OK if the wires show, and maybe it's good that they do, but the magic should at the same time be thoroughly amazing" (Harries 185). In its pursuit of hyperrealism, much stage combat in the theatre today is often brief and only in service of a play's story; without any techniques to make it "pop," the moments of violence and their thematic significance can be all too easily forgotten or ignored by audiences. I believe that staging queer violence can aspire to Kushner's magic, as well as to what Jill Dolan calls "utopian performatives,"

small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense. (*Utopia 5*)

I don't find any contradiction in finding pleasure and hope in ephemeral moments of staged violence, and throughout this dissertation, I argue that doing so is a vital step to changing the nature of violence in queer lives.

At the end of each of my chapters, I describe how such acts of “embodied resistance” might be carried out in the theatre. In these chapter conclusions – what I term a “(re)staging” – I select three issues prompted by the histories of each case study and develop ideas for how their historiography can be critically and compellingly translated to performance. Just as the overall archive of my project isn't exhaustive or comprehensive, neither are these (re)stagings meant to be. They aren't the only ways that queer violence might be revisited, and clearly, such techniques have applications to works that I don't examine within this dissertation. Still, they are all designed to address the interchange between violent queer performances onstage and violent queer performances in the streets.

In *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an “Other” America*, Kathleen Stewart beautifully describes her book project, one which I borrow here to describe my own:

This is a story, then, that cannot be told from the safe distance of a relativist chant or gathered into a collection of discrete and bounded “cultures” organized like rocks on a map. It cannot simply claim to debunk stereotypes, or to counter romance with idealism, or to “disprove” the myth of an “American” ideology. It depends instead on the more painful, dangerous, and perpetually unfinished task of unforgetting the complicity of cultural critique-as-usual in the story of America in order to

begin again with a story that catches itself up in something of the force, tension, and density of cultural imaginations in practice and use. (6)

In *Embodied Resistance: A Historiographic Intervention into the Performance of Queer Violence*, I seek to remember and reclaim histories and performances before they slip irretrievably into the past. I do so, however, not to immortalize them, but to (re)stage them and provoke critical thinking about our queerly violent present and future.

In my first chapter, “Staging Stonewall,” I examine diverse accounts of the 1969 Stonewall riots, the landmark event that has become synonymous with the rise of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender movement in America. I look to eyewitness accounts of the riots, two comprehensive book-length studies (Martin Duberman’s 1993 *Stonewall* and David Carter’s 2004 *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution*), and numerous articles by the likes of Joan Nestle and John D’Emilio on the symbolism, mythology, and legacy of the riots. In particular, I identify the queer nature of the violence at the riots: the humor, theatricality, and generosity found even in the midst of the fighting. I then chart how the story of the Stonewall riots is retold variously in four different theatrical works: Noel Greig and Drew Griffiths’ 1977 play *As Time Goes By*, Doric Wilson’s 1982 play *Street Theatre*, Tina Landau’s 1994 site specific performance art pageant *Stonewall: Night Variations*, and Stewart Wallace and Michael Korie’s 1995 opera *Harvey Milk*. I end the chapter with a description of how staging the violence at the riots can exceed spectacle and contribute to a clearer understanding of how and why Stonewall became such a watershed moment in queer history.

In my second chapter, “Staging Gay Martyrdom,” I explore the complex relationship between martyr tropes and the ways that the performance of violence

problematically enables them. I offer an auto-ethnographic account of my own reception of Terrence McNally's 1998 gay-Christ play *Corpus Christi* and of Moisés Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Company's 2000 play *The Laramie Project*. Following an examination of how the martyr trope surfaces in critical discourse and popular press accounts of Harvey Milk's assassination and Matthew Shepard's murder, I turn to the staging of these killings in two theatrical representations of Milk's life (Dan Pruitt and Patrick Hutchison's 1991 musical *The Harvey Milk Show*, and Wallace and Korie's opera *Harvey Milk*) and two cinematic portrayals of Shepard's life (the 2001 film *Anatomy of a Hate Crime*, and the 2002 film *The Matthew Shepard Story*). I conclude the chapter with a consideration of how staging the violence in Milk and Shepard's lives can simultaneously enable readings of martyrdom and eschew re-inscribing stereotypes of victimhood.

In my third chapter, "Staging the Threat of Queer Violence," I investigate the innovative strategy of preventing anti-gay violence through the mobilization of the threat of queer violence – the idea that when and where necessary, queers will "bash back." Specifically, I pursue the embodied practices of activist groups like queer street patrols of the 1970s and the 1990s, and of the Pink Pistols, a queer pro-gun organization still in existence today. Judith Halberstam's article, "Imagined Violence/Queer Violence: Representations of Rage and Resistance," describes the tremendous value to be had by generating nervousness in the Establishment, a productive use of fear to deter violence against minorities. Her essay provides a springboard into my own discussion of two plays that feature characters debating and experimenting with the political efficacy of combatting hate crimes via the threat of queer violence: Doric Wilson's 1977 *The West*

Street Gang and Split Britches' 1992 *Lesbians Who Kill*. I finish the chapter with an analysis of how such theatrical explorations of the strategies that queer street patrols and the Pink Pistols employ might move audiences to engaged activism themselves or to redefine their own relationships to violence.

In my conclusion, "Toward a Theory of Staging Violence Queerly," I thickly describe a production of Laurie Brooks's 2000 theatre-for-youth play, *The Wrestling Season*, at the University of Texas at Austin. Throughout the conclusion, I again turn to auto-ethnography to relate my own experiences as the fight choreographer on this production, and detail my own attempts to critically intervene on a script that I found intrinsically conservative. Stemming from my continued studies with the Society of American Fight Directors and my work as a teacher, actor, and critic of staged violence, I offer this meditation on violence, queerness, and history as my own public practice.

Chapter 1: Staging Stonewall

As the “prologue” to *Generation Q: Gays, Lesbians, and Bisexuals Born Around 1969’s Stonewall Riots Tell Their Stories of Growing Up in the Age of Information*, drag queen, actress, and comedienne Hedda Lettuce offers “A Birth at Stonewall,” a fictional account of her mother going into labor on New York City’s Christopher Street in the middle of the 1969 Stonewall riots. She writes that her mother, Mary, suddenly finding herself in the midst of a battle, was called to fight alongside the drag queens and fags by a vision of Judy Garland, who shows her “snapshots of all the pain gays and lesbians have suffered throughout the ages” (4). Mary’s water breaks when an angry cop hits her in the stomach, and she subsequently gives birth to Hedda, a “child destined for glamour” (4-5). Hedda concludes her story by writing: “Flash forward to today. Here I am. And don’t I look fabulous? I do still have that dent in my forehead where that billy club hit my mother’s stomach. But I cover it with Dermablend. Look how far this movement’s come since my birth” (5). This story, full of camp anecdotes common to many descriptions of the Stonewall riots – the unusual heat of that June day, patrons throwing bottles at the police – situates Hedda’s birth as parallel to the “birth” of the gay and lesbian movement, which has so often been problematically identified as occurring as a direct result of these riots.

Certainly, Hedda Lettuce isn’t the only one who has ever claimed to have had a part in the Stonewall riots when they haven’t. In an interview titled “Stonewall: A Gift to the World,” historian Joan Nestle states, “There is a joke now that everybody says they were there. Eventually, there will have been four thousand people outside of this Stonewall Tavern on those nights, which just demonstrates the yearning we have to be

part of an historical moment” (94). Nestle’s statement and Lettuce’s story highlight the tremendous stakes of the Stonewall riots, or at least, the cultural and social capital that comes from being able to claim one’s part in them. These riots, now more routinely categorized as the catalyzing event in the Gay Rights movement rather than its birth, have likely been subject to more critical scrutiny (both in academic and popular forums) than any other singular item in queer history. John D’Emilio writes in *The World Turned: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and Culture*:

There is hardly a nonfiction gay book that does not make an obligatory nod to the Stonewall Rebellion, that myth-enshrouded event when the queens fought back in Greenwich Village and the fighting spirit of gay liberation was born. The world seemed to turn that evening. The darkness of the closet was left behind forever, the fearful secrecy of gay life discarded, the shame associated with it repudiated. (ix)

D’Emilio knowingly exaggerates in saying this, of course; 1969 did mark a turning point on many fronts, but not to the extent that many early post-Stonewall historians and activists attribute to it.

“A Birth at Stonewall” is particularly useful as an example of the centrality of violence to the historical event, as well as to the intricate and contested symbol Stonewall has become. While it may seem unremarkable to suggest that violence is an integral part of a riot, scholars often neglect to write explicitly about the violence that is so key to this event. Instead, they focus on other tangential issues, especially those that attempt to parse out who was there, and thus, who has the most ownership of the Stonewall symbol. Throughout the thirty-five-plus years since Stonewall, shouting matches in the popular

press, academic circles, and on the internet have endlessly retold the events of the summer of 1969 from the perspectives of class, race, gender, and sexuality, often contradicting each other. The one constant in all of these accounts of Stonewall is that violence that took place. I argue that it is the queer nature of the violence that most provides meaning to the complex mythology and symbolism of the riots. Hedda Lettuce's account, for example, despite its humorous voice, can't escape from discussing the violent particulars of the riots – “hard-looking women throwing parking meters at the police,” and Mary herself casting “her bottle into the fray, striking a cop right between his bulbous eyes” (4). And of course, it is no accident that Hedda describes herself as being marked to this day with a dent in her forehead from when the cop hit her pregnant mother's stomach. Hedda, setting her fictional self up as stand-in for all of queer-kind, demonstrates that the violence at the Stonewall riots, for good and ill, has left an indelible mark on all GLBTQ citizens, as well as on the city of New York and the history of homosexuality.

In this chapter, I examine the Stonewall riots as both a historical and cultural phenomenon – as both a series of events in June of 1969, and as a collection of stories, much like Hedda's, that help to construct a myriad of queer identity positions. I begin the first half of this chapter by glossing “what happened” – the nature and context of the riots – and then I explore how Stonewall's history has subsequently been constructed and contested.¹ I then analyze how Stonewall functions symbolically, how it has come to

¹ My intent is to stay out of the fray; this chapter doesn't attempt to “solve” any of the major debates of the Stonewall Riots, but instead, seeks to represent the contrasting voices and contradictory interpretations of what went on. One way I do this throughout the chapter is by allowing some of these ideas to be rehearsed at length in footnotes.

mean so much to so many. After examining Stonewall from both a historiographic and symbolic standpoint, I focus on the centrality and the symbolic weight that the physical violence carries to the meaning of Stonewall. I argue that the nature of violence during the Stonewall riots is itself queer, both generative and productive.

Following these steps, I detail representations of the Stonewall riots in performance in the second part of this chapter. I look to two plays (Noel Greig and Drew Griffiths' *As Time Goes By* and Doric Wilson's *Street Theater*), a site specific piece of performance art (Tina Landau's *Stonewall: Night Variations*), and an opera (Stewart Wallace and Michael Korie's *Harvey Milk*). I pay particular attention to how each (re)presents history, invokes the complex symbolism and mythology of Stonewall, and in particular, makes use of the actual violence of the riots themselves. Finally, I conclude this chapter with a consideration of the stakes of representing Stonewall, and how (re)staging Stonewall's violence can be a useful contribution to the already dense archive of Stonewall historiography and ephemera.

Conventional Histories

Martin Duberman begins his book, *Stonewall*, by asserting, "'Stonewall' is *the* emblematic event in modern lesbian and gay history" (xvii). Though many have taken issue with this claim and worked hard to reinterpret, if not denounce, Stonewall's significance, it is difficult to argue the importance of an event that is now mentioned in nearly every work of queer nonfiction.² In brief, "Stonewall" is shorthand for "the

² Scott Bravmann's critique of Duberman is particularly astute: "Though Duberman studiously tries to offer a full accounting of the real story of the riots, I want to suggest that his book is ultimately unable to escape

Stonewall riots,” “the Stonewall uprising,” or “the Stonewall rebellion.” Over a number of evenings in the summer of 1969, a group of queer men and women fought back against police in Manhattan. The violence began early in the morning of Saturday the 29th of June, 1969, when police raided The Stonewall Inn, a mafia-owned gay bar. As the patrons were escorted outside, they began to fight back (along with the help of a growing crowd); coins, garbage, bricks, and bottles were thrown, and the police were forced to retreat into the bar. Soon, the armored Tactical Police Force (TPF) responded, and the conflict escalated into a full scale melee that lasted for hours. The next night, an even larger crowd of queers from the area gathered in front of The Stonewall Inn, which then had graffiti reading “Legalize gay bars” and “Support Gay Power” on the boarded up windows. The TPF again was called in to maintain the peace, and they skirmished with the queers in the Sheridan Square area of Greenwich Village for hours, resulting in more people arrested, more damage done to property, and even more people carried off to jail. Three days and nights of relative quiet followed, but the following Wednesday, the fighting resumed, featuring still more violence.

Three key debates about the Stonewall riots continue to circulate. Many studies of the event attempt to parse out precisely who was at the bar and who was fighting each night in the streets. Though the bar catered to a largely white male clientele, many witnesses and scholars have claimed that drag queens and lesbians were also present at the bar, and featured prominently in the fighting that followed. Others claim that young,

its opening sentence. [. . .] ‘Stonewall’ always already means more in gay and lesbian historical imaginations than a mere bar, a routine police raid, and even the exceptional riots of several nights’ duration that followed the raid. [. . .] The current value of the ‘events,’ even – or especially – to the degree of the urgency of their narration as a complete and actual story, is precisely their mythic proportions, their non-actuality, their partiality.” (70-71)

queer street youth, many of whom were Puerto Rican or Black, also fought back mightily during the riots.³ Another key preoccupation of Stonewall scholarship and history is the question of why the events happened in the first place – why did the queers choose to fight back on that particular evening? Studies have attributed everything from the weather and a full moon to the funeral earlier that day of popular gay icon Judy Garland. Some have looked to the inciting incident to resolve the motive question, and that has proved just as vexing. Many accounts cite a lesbian as the first person to fight back, while others insist it was a drag queen who first rose up. Clearly, the chaos of Friday evening’s violence coupled with the complex confluence of events and emotions before the riots means that no definitive answer to most of these questions will ever be reached. Yet the Stonewall riots, as Duberman suggests, have become such a key moment in queer history that every author of any article, book, or artwork about the riots will invariably try to resolve at least some of these issues.

Two main studies have attempted to chart the days and years leading up to the Stonewall riots: Martin Duberman’s 1993 *Stonewall* and David Carter’s 2004 *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution*. Both Duberman and Carter’s studies, though meticulously researched, often fall into the trap of the originary model, wherein Stonewall is cited or implied as the event that made gay and lesbian liberation in this country possible. Neither work is without merit, as each usefully showcases a host of details, voices, and identities that do problematize and resist seeing Stonewall as the birth of all gay political consciousness. Duberman and Carter’s works are at their best when

³ In addition to major studies by Duberman, Carter, and Bravmann, see Victoria A. Brownworth, “Stonewall 25: Not a Happy Anniversary for Lesbians”; Robert L. Pela, “Stonewall’s Eyewitnesses”;

they present such “unique” and “acute” views and interpretations that produce messy and multiple views of the Gay Rights movement, rather than when they authoritatively attempt to “present the clearest possible picture of what happened and why” (Carter 1). Duberman claims to work towards effective history: “The time is overdue for grounding the symbolic Stonewall in empirical reality and placing the events of 1969 in historical context. In attempting to do this, I felt it was important not to homogenize experience to the point where individual voices are lost sight of” (xvii-xviii). To this end, he uses interviews with just six diverse figures – three white men, one Jewish lesbian, one African-American lesbian, and a Latina transvestite – in the Gay Rights movement to create a synthesis of experiences of the Stonewall riots. Duberman follows each of their stories at first separately in chapters titled “Growing Up” and “Young Adulthood,” and then together as their lives intersect at various events in and around New York City. Though only three of his interviewees were present at the Stonewall riots, all six came together at the Christopher Street Liberation Day parade in June of 1970 to commemorate the first anniversary of Stonewall, a celebration that has since been celebrated around the world yearly at Gay Pride festivals. By weaving these six narratives together in such a way, Duberman seeks to categorize the Stonewall riots as utopic revolutions that would soon unite people with diverse backgrounds and political views.

As David Carter’s book seeks “to bring everything together that is known about the Stonewall Inn, the riots themselves, and the life and times of the people involved” (1), the author finds himself freer to cover more ground than Duberman who focuses on the

Penny Arcade, “I’m Sorry I Threw Bricks at Stonewall!”; and Mark Haile, “The Truth about Stonewall.”

narratives of six people. For instance, he documents much pre-Stonewall activist work and resistance that Duberman largely ignored because his six subjects weren't involved. Carter also gives a thicker description of Greenwich Village, the various laws and methods of enforcement against homosexuality, and the inner workings of gay bars like the Stonewall Inn, often controlled by the mafia. Carter's bibliography cites interviews with well over fifty people, which removes the burden of representation of experience that Duberman's six subjects seem to share. In addition, he is more explicit about who his narratives and evidence are coming from, and thus his seventy-five page description of the riots seems more thoroughly and completely rendered than Duberman's twenty page description. Carter seems more willing to admit the complexity of these events of the 1960s and 1970s: "Given the varied nature of the riots' causes, their origins at different points in time, and their multiplicity, the way in which these factors converged to create the Stonewall riots is an intricate story" (2). Curiously, in his conclusion he states: "While many persons have claimed the 1969 accounts of the riots either conflict with each other or are not credible, the more I studied them, the more I felt that they were both highly reliable and did not conflict with one another" (268). Running throughout Carter's work is a tension between wanting to document the messiness of history (especially one so steeped in chaos and violence) and wanting to tie the story up neatly for his readers.

Perhaps not surprisingly, neither story features many oral histories from the non-queer participants of the Stonewall rebellion like the cops, the people from the neighborhood, the allies of the gays and lesbians, which would render the history more productively complex. In his preface, Duberman posits that "gay men and lesbians—so

long denied any history—have a special need and claim on historical writing that is at once accurate and accessible” (xvii). Each of these books seems to indicate a certain sense of ownership, not just of Stonewall as symbol, but of the actual history of Stonewall. And certainly, queer historians must feel the need to rely heavily on first-person accounts of events, if for no other reason than the spectre of the AIDS crisis which continues to take a massive toll on the queer community. Investing in oral history as evidence is a way of memorializing these men and women and their labors. If these books are primarily aimed at serving the queer community, then it makes sense that in composing them, queer voices are featured and the stories from the heterosexuals present at Stonewall go largely untold. Neither Duberman nor Carter’s book is at all interested in sullyng the symbol of Stonewall as the root of gay identity, which is logical for a marginalized group that is still striving for social, religious, and political recognition and equality. Queer historians, as well as many of the queer theatre practitioners that I examine later in this chapter, at this current moment, aren’t ready to tell Stonewall’s story in any other way, nor willing to muddy or eradicate the lines between queer and straight history, as either methodology or as subject.

Significance and Symbolism

Scott Bravmann’s *Queer Fictions of the Past* also examines the Stonewall riots in great detail. In his chapter titled “Queer Fictions of Stonewall,” he analyzes Duberman’s book, before going on to take a historiographical approach to Stonewall – to examine how various historians have (re)written the Stonewall story based on their subsequent sociopolitical moment and respective identity positions. For instance, he describes how

women, drag queens, and non-whites were largely only recognized as integral to Stonewall (or inserted into the mythology) as a result of coalition politics of the late 1970s and 1980s: in essence, that Stonewall's history and symbolic value is highly mutable, and has shifted as necessary. Though annual Pride parades and celebrations commemorate the Stonewall riots, Bravmann concludes his chapter by suggesting that rather than looking only to the "coming together" legacy of the riots, "we would do better to look at how these differences inform the multiple contests of meaning invoked and evoked in representations of and claims to the Stonewall riots" (96). Like me, Bravmann is enthusiastic about Stonewall as a site of inquiry, but remains cautious about the various "queer fictions" that have been derived from it.

For instance, Stonewall has come to be a historical marker of sorts, a B.C. and an A.D. that historians and critics have used and misused endlessly. In early gay and lesbian historical analysis, and certainly in the popular press, the post Stonewall era came to symbolize activism, pride, and being "out" of the closet, where it was suddenly "okay to be gay."⁴ The rapid post-Stonewall formation of very public groups like the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and the Gay Activists Alliance helped fuel these sweeping chronological simplifications. The pre Stonewall era, according to many, was looked at

⁴ In *Gay New York: The Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, George Chauncey expertly parses the various meanings of "coming out": "Gay people in the prewar years, then, did not speak of *coming out* of what we call the 'gay closet' but rather of *coming out into* what they called 'homosexual society' or the 'gay world,'" a world neither so small, nor so isolated, nor, often, so hidden as 'closet' implies" (7). After explaining the origins of the phrase as a camp take on debutante culture and WASP high society (7), he goes on to note that in the 1950s, "coming out" came to refer to one's first sexual experience with another gay man. Only in the 1970s, he notes, does the term come to mean "announcing one's homosexuality to straight friends and family" (8). Though it is outside the scope of his book, it seems important to notice the synchronicity of the Stonewall Riots and the term's final linguistic shift. Though it would be difficult (and perhaps essentialist) to argue that the term only came to its present meaning after Stonewall, many look to the mass exodus from the Stonewall Inn (a small, closet-like venue) and out onto the streets and into the

as a political wasteland, where all gay men and women were characterized as self-loathing, isolated from one another, and generally invisible. Among the more prolific of queer historians, John D’Emilio has dedicated many pages to trying to overturn such ideas: “By the time of the Stonewall riots in New York City in 1969—the event that ignited the gay liberation movement—our situation was hardly one of silence, invisibility, and isolation. A massive, grass-roots liberation movement could form almost overnight precisely because communities of lesbians and gay men existed” (*Making Trouble* 10). Still, following John Scagliotti’s award-winning documentaries *Before Stonewall* (1984) and *After Stonewall* (1999), and especially following countless works of non-fiction that include Stonewall in their titles, it now seems almost unthinkable to imagine queer history in any paradigm that doesn’t involve June 1969.

With as much simplifying that historians and journalists have done about the riots, I’m surprised that Duberman, Carter, D’Emilio, and especially Bravmann (i.e., those particularly concerned with historiographic issues) have not paused to remark on how the issue of who “won” and “lost” the Stonewall riots has largely been left unresolved. In *The Gay Militants*, perhaps the earliest (1971) treatment of the Stonewall riots, author Donn Teal notes: “Mattachine [a homophile organization that predated the Stonewall riots by nearly two decades], obviously, and indeed thousands of gays in the city hadn’t understood who [. . .] had ‘won’ that action” (21). Like many, Teal claims victory for the queers at Stonewall, despite the fact that on each night of the riots, the TPF succeeded in

public eye as an Ur-example of what it means to “come out” – in fact, much of Stonewall’s symbolism relies on it.

dispersing the crowds, but not before bloodying uncounted numbers and arresting many.⁵ GLF activist Bob Kohler is more specific about the type of victory the young gays, lesbians, and drag queens achieved: “There had been many riots during the radical sixties with all kinds of people, but no group had ever had the cops on the run. It was the first time that cops ran and barricaded themselves—and they ran and barricaded themselves from fairies” (Deitcher 71). Kohler and others claim Stonewall as “a win” precisely because it was so unexpected, because the police would never have predicted that any gays would stand up for themselves, much less, defend themselves en masse. Certainly, the Stonewall riots can be interpreted as a turning point in the United States (and worldwide), and as a pivotal victory against the forces of conservatism. But many sources, like one unnamed participant in Robert L. Pela’s *Advocate* article, “Stonewall’s Eyewitnesses,” gesture towards the importance of remembering the physical and material toll of the riots: “By the third day [. . .] the cops outnumbered the queers five to one [. . .] In the end the cops kicked our asses” (50). Though many are quick to point to Stonewall as a moral victory, I argue that the physical sacrifice of the protesters at Stonewall – the fact that many people got hurt – ought not to be obscured or forgotten, especially as “loss” can carry important symbolic and strategic weight.

Journalists, activists, and historians have mobilized to characterize Stonewall as a victory, a rhetorical and polemic analysis that upon entering into the public sphere, has touched countless lives. I find Richard Flores’s articulation of “master symbols” to be particularly instructive when considering the Stonewall riots. In *Remembering the*

⁵ Dick Leitsch grew bored with taunting and running from the cops, so he just went home (Carter 181).

Alamo: Memory, Modernity, & the Master Symbol, Flores explores the complex history and historiography of the Alamo, and describes how for many, the Alamo has operated primarily in the symbolic realm. He notes that

master symbols like the Alamo shape and inform a wide spectrum of social experiences and cultural meanings in ways that often go unnoticed and uncritiqued; and, second, that these forms work in tandem with other generative processes like those construed around patriotism, heroism, and the nation so as to further mark as delinquent any critique of or variation from the norm. (160)

Stonewall, like the Alamo, has been marked historically as “something to be remembered”; certainly, the wide number of gay and lesbian activist groups that came into existence in the 1970s took up the event as a symbol, as a herald of change. And though years and decades later, historians like Joan Nestle and John D’Emilio did indeed notice and critique both the historical event itself as well as the meanings that have been attributed to it, the symbol of Stonewall had already structured a vast array of identities, events, and ideologies. Nestle, though hesitant to see Stonewall as the “big bang” that started it all, does recognize the value of Stonewall as symbol: “Stonewall is important because it reverberates on so many different levels. It is useful as a symbol for gay people today. It fulfills their yearning for a creation myth. It allows us to position ourselves in both the mythic and the real” (95). Nestle, like Bravmann (and myself), is chiefly interested in the symbol of Stonewall because of its malleability – because it means multiple things to many people. Stonewall is an open text, of sorts, one that has allowed generations to construct their own queer identities in a positive light, and to

locate themselves both within a (mythic) past and a very real present. Though many who write about Stonewall locate its symbolic importance with actual physical violence, I find Stonewall so compelling as historical event because it suggests the need for “fighting” writ large: for activism, for organization, for courage in the face of adversity.⁶

Flores goes on to articulate the double purpose of master symbols: “As inflections of power, master symbols serve as a semiotics of place in shaping, regulating, and informing relations between social actors in history; as a semiotics of project, master symbols mimetically connect local struggles with the movement to world culture” (160). Carter, and to a lesser extent Duberman, chart the aftermath of Stonewall – how what had begun as a very localized event became integral to gay liberation in America, and then worldwide. Nestle observes that Stonewall “is, in some way, a very airy thing. It’s both a solid event and an imaginative obsession at the same time” (97). So while “something” did in fact happen over a number of nights in the summer of 1969 in Greenwich village, the drive to invoke and internalize Stonewall’s meaning is often divorced from the event itself; how Stonewall can be used often takes priority to how Stonewall was. Nowhere is this more evident than in the branding of Stonewall, with its celebration every June worldwide, and gay clubs and bars around the country also using Stonewall in their title.⁷ Stonewall, then, as symbol, operates (as Nestle suggests), along a number of axes: fact and fiction, past and present, concrete and abstract. And while scholars like Duberman and Carter seem primarily concerned with the actuality of what happened, others, like

⁶ As just one instance, Mark Haile writes in his *BLK* article, “The Truth About Stonewall,” “The outcasts of gay life thus showed homosexual America how to make a fist, fight back, and win self-respect” (8).

⁷ Clearly, this use of the Stonewall symbol is one of reclaiming, considering the actual Stonewall Inn was a dank, oppressive bar where queers were routinely taken advantage of by police and the bar’s mafia owners.

Bravmann and Nestle, are more compelled by the polysemy of Stonewall, and excited by the messiness and complexity of its history.

Perhaps not at all surprisingly, the symbol of Stonewall has outlasted its physical antecedent. In “Stonewall Inn, Gay Icon, is Running Low on Pride,” John Koblin describes the Stonewall Inn’s decline since 1969. The bar is now largely ignored by the local queer community, considered “a blight on the neighborhood” by some, and is perpetually in danger of closing.⁸ Koblin wonders, “How could this happen? After all, the Stonewall is to the gay community as Yankee Stadium is to baseball fans. How could a place with such history and a name teeming with utter marketability, fall so hard?” After describing a string of poor management decisions and conflict with the neighborhood, Koblin answers his own question and concludes his article by quoting Edmund White, a gay author who used to frequent the bar: “I suppose the place is never as important as the symbol it becomes.” Though the Greenwich Village neighborhood has continued to be a queer Mecca of sorts in New York City, I noticed during a November 2006 visit that the block that Stonewall’s main entrance is on remains largely empty, and the Sheridan Square park just across the way seems is wholly uninspiring. Despite plaques gesturing towards the historical importance of the neighborhood, Christopher Street, and the Stonewall Inn, the park was eerily lifeless. George Segal’s well-intentioned art installation, *Gay Liberation*, makes the entire experience all the more ghostly; the piece features two men standing close together (perhaps cruising one

Carter in particular does a good job of describing how the bar was a fraught home for some of Greenwich Village’s most marginalized citizens.

⁸ When I visited the area in late November of 2006, the bar was closed, though a sign on the door promised that after remodeling, it would reopen sometime in the future.

another), and two women sitting next to one another on benches, with one's hand resting on the other's thigh. Made out of bronze and painted white, the figures seem to haunt the park; it is easy to see why the piece by Segal (who was heterosexual) was criticized widely by many as stereotypical and conservative. Commissioned on the 10th Anniversary of the riots, the piece may suggest some of the public intimacies that became available to queers in the early 1970s, but does little explicitly to relate to either the Stonewall Inn or the courageous actions of the rioters themselves. *Gay Liberation*, along with the dilapidated Stonewall Inn, perhaps suggest precisely why so many historians and artists have sought to recreate and reanalyze the Stonewall riots: with the physical referent gone, Stonewall's significance can best be glimpsed by studying the past or using performance to bring the past into the present.

Fighting

Through all of the descriptions of the Stonewall riots, numerous anecdotes about the strangeness of the fighting are featured prominently. The police weren't expecting gays to fight back, and they really weren't expecting them to fight back in the way they did – with anger and intensity, to be sure, but also with humor, with style, and with solidarity. Most descriptions of the violence, whether intentional or not, are downright theatrical; performance looms large in most accounts of the Stonewall riots, and it seems completely unsurprising that the event continues to lend itself to diversity of representations, as well a depth of symbolic meaning. I find it interesting, however, that none of the historians or critics who've written about Stonewall have spent a prolonged amount of time theorizing the nature of the violence at Stonewall. I believe that since

Stonewall continues to be a master symbol of gay and lesbian liberation as well as of queer history, it is imperative to recognize that the physical violence of the Stonewall riots is central to the appeal, the longevity, and the impact of that symbol. Anxious to dispel the myth that “spontaneous riots and street action are the necessary keys to change” (148), D’Emilio rightly asserts that “a riot or a street action is nothing but an event – unless people choose to do something else after the rioting is over. [. . .] Whether we realize it or not, the reason we commemorate Stonewall today is because *after the rioting*, many gay men and lesbians chose to do something – organize” (*The World Turned* 150). I’d like to amend D’Emilio’s argument slightly; I feel that the organizing was made possible and Stonewall was worth commemorating precisely because of the way that the queers fought at Stonewall.

To briefly return to Hedda Lettuce’s story, Mary fears the worst after she is hit by the cop and goes into labor: she expects that no one will stop to help her amidst the chaos and the violence. Hedda describes the sudden arrival of her savior – not Judy Garland, arriving via glowing bubble from the heavens, but someone else entirely:

Then, out of the crowd like a vision descending upon her, this black queen with daisies in her hair and crimson lips knelt before her and exclaimed, “My name is Marsha P. Johnson. Now push, Mary, push.” Before Mary knew it she was cradling her baby in her arms. Mary watched in amazement as Marsha took the broken bottle she was going to throw at the

cops and cut the umbilical cord. Then this angelic drag-queen midwife kissed the baby's forehead and disappeared into the angry mob. (4)⁹

Hedda's story, like many Stonewall stories (and collections of stories, like Duberman and Carter's books) features acts of generosity amidst the violence, of taking care of one another as a way of fighting back. Though this method of fighting is likely not exclusive to queer combatants, it makes sense coming from a community that is so familiar with the results of violence and recognizes the need to help each other immediately.

For instance, John D'Emilio notes in *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* that on the second night of fighting, "At the intersection of Greenwich Avenue and Christopher Street, several dozen queens screaming 'Save Our Sister!' rushed a group of officers who were clubbing a young man and dragged him to safety" (232). Carter's report of the same incident goes even further:

Without any warning, two police officers rushed into the crowd, plucked a youth from it at random—one who, according to [President of the New York branch of Mattachine, Dick] Leitsch, "had done absolutely nothing"—and carried him off to a patrol wagon. As they did so, while the two arresting officers still held the young man, four other police officers began to pound the boy's face, stomach, and genitals with

⁹ Marsha P. Johnson was a mainstay of Greenwich Village public life; a drag queen, prostitute, and one of the few people who would take care of the homeless queer street youth, she was almost always described as kind and generous, if not saintly. Some versions of the Stonewall legend suggest that Marsha was the one who first fought back, perhaps even precipitating the riots. Jean Devente, in "Stonewall's Eyewitnesses," remembers getting kicked in the face by one of the cops: "My drag queen friend Marsha Johnson came over, tore off his blouse, and wiped blood off my face. Then he said, 'Get up, girl. We got a fight on our hands'" (54). Marsha was found dead floating in the Hudson River shortly after the 1992 Pride March. Lettuce's invocation of Marsha P. Johnson both memorializes her, and comes to stand in for all of the acts of kindness that were done during the Riots.

nightsticks. A “high shrill voice” yelled, “Save our sister!” [. . .] Then, “momentarily, fifty or more homosexuals who would have to be described as ‘nelly,’ rushed the cops and took the boy back into the crowd.” Like the Red Sea, which parted to let the Hebrews escape Pharaoh’s army only to then close itself against the same army, so the queens “formed a solid front and refused to let the cops into the crowd to regain their prisoner, letting the cops hit them with their sticks, rather than let them through. (189-190)

Leitsch emphasizes that these gay men substituted their own bodies for the boy’s, sacrificing themselves rather than let one of their own fall. In “Stonewall: The Fight Continues,” Maria De La O recounts Jean DeVente’s experience at Stonewall: “Fortunately, there were a lot of gay men that came to my aid. My friends were involved in fighting off other police. They were out for blood that night, but we stood up to them – gay men and lesbians together – I was very proud” (31). Still other descriptions note that people helped others get out of handcuffs, or released one another from the paddy wagons when the police were otherwise occupied. Solidarity is a central trope in descriptions of violence at Stonewall. Though the disparate identities among New York’s gay and lesbian community seldom came together before the riots, and in the decades that followed would split in myriad directions because of precisely such issues of race, class, and gender, during the riots, they united against a common enemy and fought, in many instances, as one. Many accounts of the riots also feature memories of the inmates of New York City’s House of Detention, many of whom were lesbians, “setting toilet paper on fire and dropping it from their cell windows to show their support for the

rioters” (Carter 188). And even before the riots got started, taking care of one another was observed inside the Stonewall Inn: “As the customers were made to line up, word passed down the line that the police were not letting people without identification out. Those in line began to conspire together to share their identification, figuring that if a person had an extra form of ID on him and it did not have a photograph, that ID could be lent to a person who had none” (Carter 140). Like the fires and cheering from the Women’s prison, fighting back against the police and demonstrating solidarity happened in diverse, innovative, and sometimes non-violent ways.

As the police emptied the Stonewall Inn of its customers on the first night, a crowd had already gathered outside. Duberman notes, “Some of the campier patrons, emerging one by one from the Stonewall to find an unexpected crowd, took the opportunity to strike instant poses, starlet style, while the onlookers whistled and shouted their applause-meter ratings” (195). Lucian Truscott, one of the two writers for *The Village Voice* on the scene, wrote: “It was initially a festive gathering [. . .] cheers would go up as favorites would emerge from the door, strike a pose, and swish by the detective with a ‘Hello there, fella.’ The stars were in their element” (1). Those exiting the Stonewall Inn fought back with style, refusing to be frightened of the police, or to treat the event as grave or serious. Truscott goes on to describe the humor that characterized both of the first two evenings of fighting: “One-liners were as practiced as if they had been used for years. ‘I just want you all to know,’ quipped a platinum blond with obvious glee, ‘that sometimes being homosexual is a big pain in the ass.’ Another allowed as how he had become a ‘left-deviationist.’ And on and on” (18). Duberman describes a moment on Saturday night where a cop taunted one of the queers present:

“Start something, faggot, just start something, [. . .] I’d like to break your ass wide open.” The queer, Duberman reports, had the presence of mind to point out “What a Freudian comment, officer!” (208). Most accounts of the riots include anecdotes about the humor that was used during those nights, which arguably demonstrates the uniqueness of the event, as well as the joyfully camp spirit that many of the queers brought to the fighting. Leitsch claimed “Their [the “queens”] bravery and daring saved many people from being hurt, and their sense of humor and ‘camp’ helped keep the crowd from getting nasty or too violent” (Carter 192). Though the men and women of Greenwich Village did fight back physically, they also fought back with their tongues and their minds, an element of Stonewall that not only needs to be remembered as colorful anecdote, but celebrated as key to the success of the riots.

Moments of pure joy and fun also surface in many iterations of the Stonewall story. Truscott describes that even during the fighting, some of the queers present paused to enjoy the event: “As the wood barrier behind the glass was beaten open, the cops inside turned a fire hose on the crowd. Several kids took the opportunity to cavort in the spray, and their momentary glee served to stave off what was rapidly becoming a full-scale attack” (18). Of course, the most often-cited example of queers fighting (and fighting queerly) is the frequent appearance on both Friday and Saturday nights of a kick line of drag queens, taunting the police while singing, “We are the Stonewall Girls, we wear our hair in curls. We wear no underwear, we show our pubic hairs.” When the TPF would advance on them, the drag queens would break rank, run around the block using alleys and side streets, and repeat their song and dance. As the streets around the Stonewall were mazelike (and not on a grid, as is much of Manhattan), it took hours for

the TPF to disperse the crowds, especially because the queers were on their home turf. The linking of arms and celebrating their defiance through a kick-line has itself become an emblem of the riots, symbolizing the joy and pride that comes from standing up against oppression. In addition to such moments of humor during the events, many people who recount the riots list events that are humorous (or ironic) in retrospect: the “symbolic justice” of a policeman breaking his wrist (Duberman 202), cars in a wedding party being stopped by a crowd of queers laughing and claiming, “We have the right to marry, too!” (Duberman 204), a firework being set off underneath a cop such that he jumped in the air and landed on his “moneymaker” (Carter 200). Carter also describes another skirmish on Saturday night when suddenly one member of a large group of queers running from the police realized that they outnumbered those they were fleeing from. Carter writes, “He immediately shouted that they should catch the police, rip their clothes off, and screw them on the spot. As the crowd turned on them, the police quickly reversed themselves and ran for blocks with the angry crowd in hot pursuit, yelling, ‘Catch them! Fuck them!’” (193). Many such moments, though likely terrifying during the riots, have become part of the lore of the Stonewall riots – an event best characterized as both a battle and a wild street party, where humor and style were some of the queers’ most frequent and effective weapons.¹⁰

Again, Nestle is correct when she suggests that the symbol of Stonewall operates on multiple, often contradictory levels. Like the “inciting incident” issue at the riots,

¹⁰ Carter notes, “Ironically, the TPF’s psychology of using machismo to try to intimidate protesters whom society had branded as deficient in masculinity—and hence courage—ultimately raised the question of who, indeed, was braver: the TPF hiding behind their shields and helmets, equipped with guns and billy clubs, with all the force of the law and the approval of society behind them, or the gay men—with most of

some historians also have tried to parse out when the fun turned to anger, when the camp sensibility was evacuated in favor of anger and physical violence. While I'm skeptical of this kind of "flashpoint" seeking project, I do find it is important to examine the context of the violence within the riots, as well as its very material effects. Despite the fun and the humor, the Stonewall riots did feature numerous injuries, including many people needing to be hospitalized, including one teenager who lost two fingers when slammed in a car door. Vela describes the experiences of John Paul, a Stonewall participant who went deaf in one ear because of an injury sustained during the riots: "This year Paul began therapy to deal with the flashbacks he experiences of violence he witnessed at Stonewall. 'We've got to remember that those of us who fought were not just fighting for our rights,' [Paul] says, 'we were fighting for our lives'" (53). Duberman succinctly sums up the battle's toll by noting that "a considerable amount of blood had been shed" (201).¹¹ The police experienced moments of real fear, too. Howard Smith, a reporter from *The Village Voice* who during the first night of fighting retreated into the Stonewall Inn along with the police, said, "The sound filtering in doesn't suggest dancing faggots anymore. It sounds like a powerful rage bent on vendetta" (25).¹² Similarly, Duberman describes the atmosphere after the police first retreated into the bar:

[Deputy Inspector] Pine had been accustomed to two or three cops being

those in the kick line being effeminate to some degree—the objects of society's scorn and ridicule, offering their vulnerable bodies as targets and armed with nothing more than their intelligence and humor?" (191).

¹¹ Mercifully, only one death occurred as a result of the riots. Demonstrators rocked a taxi cab back and forth that had made the mistake of turning down the street where protests going on; after being allowed to drive away, the driver later died of a heart attack (Carter 186).

¹² One theory behind why the riots began again that Wednesday, after three nights of relative peace, is that *The Village Voice* came out that day, featuring Truscott and Smith's articles with numerous anti-gay slurs in them.

able to handle with ease any number of cowering gays, but here the crowd wasn't cowering; it had routed eight cops and made them run for cover. As Pine later said, "I had been in combat situations, [but] there was never any time that I felt more scared than then." With the cops holed up inside Stonewall, the crowd was now in control of the street, and it bellowed in triumph and pent-up rage. (198)

Those who chronicle (or otherwise represent) the Stonewall riots have difficulty striking the balance between the humor of the riots and the currents of anger and very real physical violence that cycled throughout.

To be fair, street actions happened frequently during the charged atmosphere of the 1960s.¹³ Many histories of Stonewall feature anecdotes about people just walking by the mayhem, with little more reaction than, "Oh, another riot" (*Making Trouble* 240). D'Emilio, for one, is cautious about reading too much uniqueness into the Stonewall riots: "The Stonewall Riot may very well have been the first of its kind in history, but when the patrons confronted the police they were extending to gay turf familiar modes of action" (*Making Trouble* 240-241).¹⁴ While I agree with D'Emilio that it is imperative

¹³ Penny Arcade is adamant about the importance of the larger 1960s context: "This is something which is missing from the way The Stonewall is remembered today. People talk about the riots and the gay scene of that time completely out of the context of the whole downtown scene. I mean, the same kids who were rioting at The Stonewall on the West side were throwing bricks and bottles at cops from the tops of buildings on St. Mark's Place. Today, gay artists and activists, the ones who even think their history is important, talk about The Stonewall as if it were a separate thing, but it was all part of a larger scene and a whole feeling that had been growing among hippies, radicals, and so on across the country for year, and which became focused in neighborhoods like the Village. The riots at Stonewall and the things which led up to it were part of something which was taking place in New York and all over the world" (128).

¹⁴ And some of the key players in the riots were also members of other groups who had experienced similar conflicts. Jim Fouratt (one of Duberman's six main interviewees), for instance, was also a major spokesman for the Yippies, and came prepared on Saturday night with marbles and pins and other tricks and tools of urban guerilla warfare. According to Duberman, "he wanted the riot at Stonewall to be 'as good as any riot' his straight onetime comrades had ever put together or participated in" (205). Wednesday

to consider the Stonewall riots within the greater context of the multiple liberation movements taking place during the 1960s, I still find the particularities of the struggle – who was fighting, and how – worthy of investigation, if not (careful) celebration.¹⁵ In addition to downplaying the uniqueness of the Stonewall riots, many historians find it necessary to speak to its relatively small scale. Scott Bravmann, for instance, compares the bloodshed and (almost nonexistent) death toll to other contemporary events:

The Stonewall riots were tame in relation to the scope of protests, riots, and police brutality that would also have been familiar from elsewhere. Indeed, compared to attacks on civil rights activists, the Tlaeteloco massacre in Mexico City, the events at the Sorbonne in May 1968, and the Columbia University strike, the level of violence surrounding the events at the Stonewall was low. (86)

Yet Bravmann, Duberman, and Carter all speak to the staying power of the riots – of their ability to remain in the (queer) public’s consciousness for years, and to generate, inspire, and mobilize many to organization and activism.

Stonewall’s Value

night, many believe, was less campy and more senselessly destructive and violent than the battles of the previous weekend because other groups, like the Yippies, the Black Panthers, and student revolutionaries and anarchists co-opted the battle against the police as their own. Carter describes the random setting of fires around the neighborhood on Wednesday, as well as the looting of homophile businesses (204).

¹⁵ D’Emilio, like many others, observes that the Pride parades that are meant to mark the Stonewall riot and the advancement of Gay Liberation are strangely devoid of history today: “I have been surprised by how Stonewall celebrations have been drained of political meaning. They have become an excuse for street parties, filled with vendors. I like parties, but I wish these packed a political message” (*The World Turned* 146).

Qualifications such as those by D’Emilio and Bravmann, along with the curious way that the Stonewall riots stick out as “the emblematic event” in queer history necessitate an examination of how one might assess or value the violence of the Stonewall riots. In “Mythologizing Stonewall,” Maida Tilchen speaks to her ideal assessment of Stonewall’s significance:

It almost insults the non-violent nature of gay liberation to celebrate this uniquely violent episode, complete with bottles, guns, baseball bats, and fistfights with the police. I’d rather think of the Stonewall riot in terms of another kind of event that was reported: as the Tactical Police Force came around the corner to break up the crowds outside the bar, a chorus line of drag queens confronted them with a can-can. Now that’s my idea of a true revolutionary act. Instead of commemorating a battle of macho values clashing, perhaps lesbians and gay men should celebrate in terms of a feminist transformation of consciousness, rejoicing in the gradual change in awareness that is feminism rather than some mass moment of revelation.

While I tend to agree that Stonewall can be celebrated as the fomentation of a set of ideas and ideals, and though I approve of her preference for detailing the kick-lines of Stonewall rather than just the bloodshed, I am hesitant to dismiss the physical violence of the riots completely. I disagree that gay liberation has been inherently non-violent, and I find that part of what makes the Stonewall riots so compelling as a symbol is the precise amount of violence that was present – enough to serve as an assertion of identity, but not enough to incite national retaliation against queer communities. The gay liberation

movement would not have been well served had Stonewall been a massacre on either side. Eric Marcus also finds it important that the participants honored their anger: “We can all relate to the sense of frustration and indignity that the Stonewallers experienced. And we can take pride in the actions of those young people in 1969 who lashed out in a way that plenty of us have fantasized about. The notion of bashing back has a great visceral appeal, even if it’s rarely the appropriate response.” Marcus makes it clear that one can celebrate the initial expression of anger and the momentary answering of violence with violence without advocating always responding in such a way. Thus, it is the duty of the historian, as well as the artist, to respond to Stonewall not just a cohesive whole, but to parse out the complicated series of choices and actions of the rioters, some of which were more courageous and productive than others.

Joan Nestle’s views on the Stonewall riots are among the most eloquent of any that have analyzed the event. Though she understands the material and rhetorical importance of what happened in New York City in the summer of 1969, she finds it important to characterize Stonewall not as a set of violent interactions, but as a personal and communal act: “So other areas were having their Stonewalls, a sort of public taking on of a queer self and a political self. Besides that, from what I know, Stonewall echoed even in small towns. Also, other cities were having their own confrontations in different ways” (96). By lifting “Stonewall” from the physically violent events of Greenwich Village, she creates in Stonewall a symbol even more accessible and applicable to the changes that happened over a span of decades around the country. Violence is subsumed “in confrontation,” stretching the metaphoric value of Stonewall in useful ways. She says,

I think Stonewall was a process too. When you see the young people coming to the [Lesbian Herstory] Archives now you know. Coming from small towns or tight family situations, they are waiting for Stonewall; Stonewall is waiting for them. It is that revolutionary moment waiting for them, but they have to make their way to it, which means that the process is always being renewed. [. . .] So I think it's fascinating to think of Stonewall as the successful revolutionary moment waiting for a different set of arrivals, and its impact will probably go on for many many years this way, through multiple rediscoveries. (98)

Like D'Emilio, Koblin worries in his article about younger generations not knowing or caring about Stonewall. By reframing Stonewall as a process, one that queers of each generation can (and must) participate in, I believe Nestle replenishes the symbolic value and cultural relevance of the Stonewall riots. I am also drawn to Bernstein and Silberman's almost flippant appraisal of the Stonewall riots in their anthology, *Generation Q*: "What really happened at the Stonewall Inn that night is both contestable and possibly irrelevant" (xviii). Alongside the mutability of the Stonewall symbol that Nestle articulates, I find the irrelevance that Bernstein and Silberman describe almost liberating, both as a historian and as an artist. Though "what really happened" may be besides the point, I argue that the manifold ways that we represent the Stonewall riots (particularly the violence), either as "history" or as "art," continue to be formative, inspirational, and worthy of scrutiny.

As Time Goes By

Noel Greig and Drew Griffiths' 1977 play *As Time Goes By* spans seventy years of gay male history, and operates, as John Clum suggests in *Acting Gay*, as "an example of historical gay drama fulfilling its traditional function of education and assertion of a gay culture" through "a catalog of literary and historical personages and events" (224). The first section of the play documents the fraught atmosphere of London in 1896 as British homosexuals, fearing the same persecution that Oscar Wilde received, prepare to flee to Paris. The second part of the play takes place between 1929 and 1934 in Germany, and features sexologist Magnus Hirschfield as a character, as well as a group of friends who work at a Berlin nightclub as they cope with the conservative backlash that Hirschfield's research prompted. The final third of Greig and Griffiths' play is set in New York in 1969, in a bar on Christopher Street. Though the climactic skirmish that takes place in that bar is never explicitly mentioned as such in the text, it is clear that Greig and Griffiths have ended their story by representing, and thus calling upon the charged symbol of the Stonewall riots.

Though the effect of individual productions may vary, Greig and Griffiths are careful not to structure the play as a simple progress narrative or to suggest that the riots at Stonewall were either the beginning of gay rights or the end of political persecution. In their introduction to the play, Greig and Griffiths suggest:

As Time Goes By sets out to show that the oppression gay people experience is not just a product of the here and now. The involvement of gay men in history does not begin and end with the usual list of kings and composers. In this play various groups of gay men are continually caught

up in history, yet alienated from it by the violence practiced against them. It shows how there were attempts to fight back, to seek justice, and how these were smashed, often brutally. The “No” of the Stonewall riots, with which the play concludes, was not the beginning of our collective history, but simply the start of its present phase. (5)

As Time Goes By documents how violence, in all of its guises, has been perpetrated against gay men, both from the aristocracy and the working classes. By structuring all three sections of the play to contain law enforcement officers and legal sanctions against homosexuals, the playwrights argue that state sponsored oppression and violence has long been central to homosexual history.

The concluding “Stonewall” scene features a fairly typical selection of gay “types” of the 1960s: a Drag Queen mourning the death of Judy Garland, a Student trying to figure out where women fit into his life as a gay man, a white Businessman trying to work through the race politics of dating a black man, a Barman who despite his best efforts was still drafted into the army for the Vietnam War, and a Leather Guy who grunts and spits, but does not speak. Much of the Stonewall portion of *As Time Goes By* is taken up by each of the characters present at the bar delivering monologues, working through their various problems and anxieties. Each is ostensibly talking to the barman, or to himself, or to the audience – the script doesn’t make it clear. What is largely missing from this scene is dialogue, and therefore, any sense of community; none exists because no one is listening to one another. Monologue follows monologue without any sense of logic or any indication of connection between the bar’s patrons. About the only thing they have in common is their desire; all but the Drag Queen are there cruising,

and when another character – the Man – enters the bar, he attracts everyone’s attention. As the Drag Queen enters veiled at the beginning of the scene, he offers flowers – “Flores para los muertos” (61) – in turn to each of the other men at the bar, all of whom refuse the flowers and refuse to talk to him. Toward the end of the scene, the Drag Queen pins a picture of Judy Garland to the bar, and says: “Okay. I know I’m breaking the rules but maybe we could put this silence to some good use. Like we could have two minutes of it to commemorate what happened today” (68). As a pianist plays “Over the Rainbow,” everyone in the bar stops to listen, and this time, when the Drag Queen begins to offer flowers to the men, they accept them.

This scene, then, and Greig and Griffith’s version of Stonewall, is a story about learning to listen to one another and about the recognition of commonalities that enable the coming together of a group of diverse people to achieve a common goal. At first, listening to the Drag Queen and the pianist’s song unites them in collective mourning for Judy Garland. As the song is playing, the Drag Queen goes to give the Man a flower, and the Man shows a badge and reveals himself to be a plainclothes cop. The cop threatens to bring the Drag Queen to jail, accusing him of solicitation. The stage directions read:

“The Drag Queen appeals to each person in the bar to tell the Cop he wasn’t soliciting, as the Cop follows, grabbing at him. He is completely ignored. The Cop pulls the Drag Queen to the door, who falls to his knees” (69). The bond that the men at the bar briefly formed when listening to Judy’s song seems to dissipate in the presence of the Cop; these men know the routine – if they don’t make noise, they’ll be left alone and only the Drag Queen will have to face the law. Unexpectedly, though, the Drag Queen shouts “No!” just at the door: *“They Start to fight. The Student tries to intervene and is pushed away*

by the Cop. The Leather Guy comes forward, followed by the Barman” (69). Even though they had refused to help the Drag Queen initially, once he shouted “No!” and the fight began, everyone in the bar suddenly came together, whether because of Judy’s song, the Drag Queen’s defiant speech act, or the sudden eruption of noisy violence in their communal space. The Drag Queen screams at the men “Get him out! Get him out,” and the men do just that: “The four men attack the cop and lift him off his feet. The Businessman, who has been by the doorway, runs over and joins in. They carry him, kicking and shouting, from the bar. The piano stops. The stage is empty” (69).

Of key significance in Greig and Griffiths’ recreation of history is that their gay men won at Stonewall – not just a moral victory, but an immediate physical one. Greig and Griffiths end their Stonewall battle as the cop is carried outside of the bar. This is an important reversal of space, considering that most real-life accounts document the cops dragging patrons of the Stonewall out to the streets, upon which the unruly mob forces the cops to seek refuge back in the bar itself. Greig and Griffiths suggest that the gay men in the bar held their ground, both claiming and defending their own space from those who sought to impose upon it. Certainly, this ending is more satisfying for an audience than the other segments of the play in which gay men are persecuted and made to flee. And since Stonewall has been claimed so many times since 1969 as a symbolic victory for all of queer-kind, the leap that Greig and Griffiths make in having the gay men win seems less than surprising; they are merely simplifying the story for dramatic and thematic effect. This is Stonewall-lite, a version of the story which skips the intermediate step of three nights of violent fighting (that featured serious casualties on both sides) and jumps directly to the symbolic victories of Stonewall.

Though from Greig and Griffiths' introduction it is clear that the scene is meant to represent the events that began at the Stonewall Inn and later spilled out into the streets, the bar in their play is only ever said to be on Christopher Street in the Greenwich Village area of New York City. In doing so, Greig and Griffiths seem to be giving themselves the leeway to alter the events to suit their purposes; clearly, they didn't have the resources to strive for any kind of "authenticity" onstage, and so one cop stands in for the number of plainclothes and uniformed policemen who raided the bar, just as a handful of patrons – all of whom were men – replace a crowded bar full of many different kinds of people. The bar in *As Time Goes By* becomes a sort of "everybar," a symbol that up and down Christopher Street, throughout Greenwich Village, across New York City, all over the country, and around the globe – a revolution was taking place.

Again, Greig and Griffiths rightly correct any notion that Stonewall was "the end" of oppression, persecution, or struggle. Immediately following the fight at the close of the Stonewall section of their play, the Drag Queen comes back onstage, removes his hat, and addresses the audience directly as actor, rather than as character. He says:

And the story continues. In the Middle Ages they burned witches.

Witches were usually women who lived without men. So they burned the lesbians; and when doing so, they tied together in bundles men who loved each other, to kindle the fire at the feet of the women. These were the faggots. And the story continues. Until the riots in Christopher Street, gay men had forgotten that their burning bodies had provided a torch to consume the women. No one had bothered to remind them. Their attempts and their failures had ignored that. When the men finally

emerged from the bars, and onto the streets of New York, they found that the women were up there as well. And our stories continue. (70)

Rhetorically, the progression from “And the story continues” to “And our stories continue” shows that Greig and Griffiths understand the significance of the Stonewall symbol, as well as the complex role it plays within queer histories. These lines suggest that the action of the Stonewall riots continued beyond the boundaries of the play, and that the one Stonewall story that they enact is just a part – a fragment, really – of a greater whole. And at this, the conclusion of the play, Greig and Griffiths invoke the first person plural to include the audience in all of the stories that are continuing, affirming again that the history that has been presented onstage is incomplete and ongoing, but important enough to rehearse and remember.

As Time Goes By was written for Gay Sweatshop, a British theatre company that began in the 1974/1975 theatre season with the goal of changing the public’s attitudes about homosexuality. Following several years of collaborations and disagreements, the group split into a Women’s company and a Men’s company in 1977. *As Time Goes By* was the inaugural play for the Men’s company, directed by Noel Greig and acted by some of Gay Sweatshop’s regulars including Drew Griffiths. The cast was entirely male, which helps explain why no women were present in the bar scene in the final third of the play, as well as why some characters, like the Student, are so preoccupied with puzzling out the often difficult political and social relationships between gay men and women. The Actor/Drag Queen’s final speech, then, is an attempt to bring lesbians into the sweep of the play’s history, and to suggest to the largely male audience (and to reaffirm amongst the Male company’s members) that the stories of gay men and women have run parallel

and intersected at various times throughout history. Interestingly enough, this final speech posits Stonewall not just a place of listening to one another, but as an occasion where gay men and women (re)discovered their common pasts, which in the moment and over time would lead them to fight back and demand a place in society. Though the speech feels dropped in at the end of the play, it makes sense within the context of the political differences going on between men and women in *Gay Sweatshop* in the mid-1970s – some of the same problems that were ongoing in activist groups in both Britain and the United States.

In “A Culture that isn’t Just Sexual: Dramatizing Gay Male History,” John Clum writes, “The Stonewall riot that ends *As Times Goes By* is a beginning of violent resistance to oppression and economic exploitation, but far from a conclusive action” (180). Clum’s idea that the fight at the end of the play is “far from a conclusive action” makes sense regarding both the symbolism of the Stonewall riots within the arc of history, as well as gesturing towards the ambiguity present in the script. Is the exchange between the Drag Queen and the Cop meant to be a representation of the initiating moment of the Stonewall riots? For instance, the Drag Queen’s “No!” could be delivered either forcibly or meekly, full of symbolic weight as the mythic drag queen who may have started the real-life Stonewall riots, or as a victim, pleading with the cop not to take him to jail or to beat him senseless. Following the Drag Queen’s “No!”, the stage directions indicate that “*They start to fight,*” (presumably, the Drag Queen and the Cop), but no indication is given as to how aggressive the Drag Queen is, or why his fight with the Cop prompts the other men at the bar to step in and join the fight. Do the patrons of the bar rush to the Drag Queen’s aid because he can’t take care of himself, or are they

rallied by his courageous actions to collaboratively put a stop to the abuse of homosexuals that they themselves have witnessed and received so many times? As agitprop and as historiography, every choice surrounding the staging of this moment of historical violence is vital.

Street Theater

Doric Wilson also explores the Stonewall riots in his play *Street Theatre*, first performed at Theatre Rhinoceros in San Francisco in 1982. Though it has much in common with *As Time Goes By* and even Duberman and Carter's versions of Stonewall, Wilson's play also has a number of innovative turns and techniques that transform it into a unique and productive contribution to queer history. The title of the play refers to its setting; as opposed to the interior bar set that Greig and Griffiths use, Wilson's entire play takes place out on Christopher Street, just down from the Stonewall Inn. In doing so, he removes his characters from the private (their residences) and the semi-private (the gay bars), and explores who they are as individuals and as a community out in the open. *Street Theater* is a comedy, capitalizing in part on the biting humor wielded by many of the rioters, as well as the ironic, oddball, and just plain ludicrous events and contexts that surrounded the riots. For example, one subplot of the play has two undercover vice-cops arresting one another, an odd example of entrapment that Wilson claims to have actually witnessed in Greenwich Village (www.doricwilson.com). The title of the play hints at its playful, bawdy and carnivalesque nature, and the play itself calls attention to the everyday performances of gender and sexuality of the characters, as well as the heroic

and memorable performances by those who stood up to the police's violence at the Stonewall riots.

Sometimes referred to as “the father of gay theater,” Doric Wilson was an early member of Café Cino and a co-founder of The Other Side of Silence (TOSOS) theatre, one of the nation's first gay theatre companies. Wilson was present at all three nights of the Stonewall riots, and admits that the events of *Street Theater* are largely autobiographical, though not all of the characters have real life corollaries. Wilson suggests that the character of Jack is not meant to represent him, but that the character of Boom Boom, one of the stylish drag queens, is an homage to Marsha P. Johnson (www.doricwilson.com). Because of Wilson's participation in the riots, much of the discourse around the play (interviews, reviews, criticism) addresses issues of history and authenticity. The play aspires to both entertain and to teach – Wilson reopened his theatre company in 2001 (as TOSOS II) and revived *Street Theater* shortly thereafter because of his perception that “most young gays have almost no sense of their culture unless it is naked and singing” (“Internet Interview with Doric Wilson”). With *Street Theater*, Wilson is celebrating the acts of his friends who were at the riots, as well as attempting to put his own authoritative stamp on queer history, one that attributes the fighting at Stonewall to the street queens, leather-men, hippies, and dykes, but not to the middle-class self-loathing Village gays.

The first act of *Street Theater* introduces the audience to a wider range of types than what *As Time Goes By* allowed: a leather-man named Jack, a politically incorrect lesbian named C.B., a flower child named Heather, a student radical named Jordan and his new-left liberal counterpart named Gordon, street queens named Ceil and Boom

Boom, a new kid in town named Timothy, and a deeply closeted member of the intelligentsia named Sidney (9). Throughout the play, they go on about their daily routine in The Village while being abused by Seymour and Donovan, undercover vice-cops, and Murfino, the corrupt manager of the Stonewall Inn. Wilson lets the audience hear about many of the events that contributed to the outpouring of anger at the riots: the culture of entrapment, the routine raids on the Stonewall Inn which benefited both its Mafia owners and the police, the death of Judy Garland, and the continued treatment of residents of the Village as “gutter crud” (11).

The second act of the play builds to a climax with the Stonewall riots, where most of the characters stand together against the mafia and the police, including the closeted Sidney, who finally embraces his own identity and chooses to stand alongside those willing to fight back. The final stage directions indicate: “*Sidney, Ceil, Boom Boom, C.B., Heather, Jack, Timothy, Jordan and Gordon make a grouping worthy of a statue in Sheridan Square. Again flashing red lights illuminate the stage, again accompanied by sirens*” (151). This stage direction carried extra meaning for productions after Segal’s unsatisfying “Gay Liberation” was actually installed in Sheridan Square on June 23rd, 1992; under skilled directorial hands, the final image of Wilson’s *Street Theater* could function both as criticism and as revisionist history – as the Stonewall memorial that more fully illustrates a courageous community. In *Acting Gay*, Clum notes that throughout the play, “we watch the characters move from seeing themselves as ‘them,’ the outsiders and criminals that society sees, to asserting an ‘us,’ a positive identity” (224). Similarly, in “Acting Gay in the Age of Queer: Pondering the Revival of *The Boys in the Band*,” Timothy Scheie addresses the formation of a community as the central

theme of *Street Theater*: “Wilson draws an unambiguous battle line that ideologically but also very literally delineates the newly liberated and proud gay community, which coalesces into a unified ‘we,’ from the oppressive mainstream and those who fear to challenge it” (6). While the conclusion of Wilson’s play does feature and laud a likeminded group of people, I’m hesitant to read the play precisely as Clum and Scheie seem to: as a moment where a community is formed. Early scenes in the play include instances of kindness and friendship between the characters – C.B. inspects and offers to fix Jack’s motorcycle, Jack warns Ceil and Boom Boom that Seymour is a cop, Heather and C.B. try to cheer each other up after a bad day – which document a positive and self-actualized community that predates Stonewall. Clum and Scheie’s analyses focus on Sidney joining the community during the final minutes of the play, but to only focus on Sidney’s journey neglects the other relationships and political acts that predate the riots, much as D’Emilio characterizes early Stonewall scholarship as overlooking pre-Stonewall identities and activism. To amend Clum and Scheie’s interpretations of the play, I contend that *Street Theater* does not portray a community formation because of Stonewall, but rather, demonstrates an already formed community recognizing the need to physically stand up and fight back against social injustice together.

One of Wilson’s central goals with *Street Theater*, besides just education and entertainment, is to get the audience to experience ownership of the events in the play, as well as to take responsibility for them; Stonewall, Wilson implies, continues to resonate as a call for queers to stand up to violence and oppression. Playwright Richard Hall writes, “Gay theater will bear witness to some sense of community, to a shared experience of choosing sides, that is a central fact of gay life. Events onstage will be

joined somehow to our choices offstage” (qtd. in Clum 224). One way that Wilson accomplishes this is through an interesting intertextual link that he inserts at the beginning of his play. Murfino, the thuggish manager of the Stonewall Inn, begins the play by directing addressing the audience on a bare stage, suggesting the opening of Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*. When Jack and C.B. enter and interrupt his narration, Murfino explains, “Clearly you are unread and unawares of Therman Wilder (sic) whom I am emulating in this introduction of them to our town here so to speak. (*To the audience.*) He was of your lavender leaning, Therman Wilder. Bet they never taught you that in school” (14). Murfino’s speech implies that the audience is made up of gays and lesbians, a claim likely true both at the play’s opening at Theatre Rhinoceros, and at an early New York City production in April 1982, which was staged not in a theatre but a leather-bar called the Mineshaft. Murfino, as his speech implies, is not part of the play’s “we”; he is not of “lavender leaning,” and he has foreknowledge of the raid at the Stonewall Inn. Responding to Murfino’s comment, C.B. describes how she was in *Our Town* in vocational high, again wresting control of the narration and of *Our Town*’s significance away from Murfino. If Greenwich Village is in fact the *Our Town* of the queers of Greenwich Village in 1969 (and the audience), then the story is going to be told primarily in their words. Though the reference isn’t carried on throughout the play, tropes of belonging and ownership and mutual struggle are. As Wilson characterizes it, 1969’s Christopher Street is fraught with danger for gays and lesbians or anyone seeking to diverge from social norms. Importantly, by comparing the quintessential small town American experience found in Wilder’s play to Greenwich Village, Wilson suggests that

the lives of the characters in *Street Theater* – lives bound up in struggle and violence – represent queer America writ large.

In *Street Theater*, the only two gay men who refuse to participate in the riots are Michael and Donald, characters who are so full of self-loathing that they can't see any reason for unity or pride. Though most narratives of the Stonewall riots include reports of people who choose not to join in, Wilson describes his Stonewall dissenters as "Michael and Donald from *The Boys in the Band*" (42). Wilson transplants these two characters from Mart Crowley's 1968 gay play (which was still playing in New York City during June of 1969) and then denies them a place within the group. In doing so, he sets up a clear line between those who are willing to take a stand for their own rights and freedoms, and those who are not. Scheie writes,

The dramatic events of the 1969 Stonewall riots upstaged *The Boys in the Band* and made visible in the streets a very different type of gay man, one who boldly took action in defense of his dignity. The powerless, self-blaming, washed-up characters of Crowley's play no longer announced the future, emblemizing instead a troubled past that contrasted starkly with the nascent gay liberation movement. (5)

At the close of the play, Michael and Donald vent their internalized hatred and conservatism on the rest of the queers, who repeatedly chant "Join us" (148-150). Sidney resists, citing his career, his family, and the social risk. Only as Donald shouts, "You faggots are revolting!!" (150) does Sidney find his way. He retorts, "You bet your sweet ass we are" (151), joining the other "fighting" queers of the play. Sidney finally owns and rejoices in both meanings of "revolting" – both "unseemly" to the oppressive

heteronormative society and willing to combat it. As a consequence of their unwillingness to fight, Michael and Donald do not get memorialized with the play's final image, just as *The Boys in the Band* is eventually eclipsed within queer history by the uprising on Christopher Street.

Not unlike the theatre of Ancient Greece, just about all of the violence in *Street Theater* takes place offstage, and then is reported by those who witnessed it once they return to the stage. C.B. and Heather, who have been drinking at the Stonewall, come rushing back to tell Jack "they're raiding the Stonewall!" (137). Seymour and Donovan rush off to take their place against the rioters, and C.B. and Heather tell about their brief skirmish:

HEATHER: You should have been with us-

C.B.: -Heather's a hero-

HEATHER: -you're the brave one-

C.B.: -this one cop had me in a hammerlock-

HEATHER: -so I kneed him in the groin-

C.B.: -he sat down on the curb and wept-

HEATHER: -you'd have thought it was the first time he'd ever met with

passive resistance. (138)

Though their friendship predated the riot, it is cemented in common action – the hero-making act of taking care of one another during times of stress.¹⁶ Heather also reports

¹⁶ Donald and Michael dismiss the riots, of course, explaining them as "just another raid," and "a bunch of hysterical faggots" (139). With Donald and Michael's dialogue, Wilson echoes some of the more conservative observations made of the riots, both by gays in the neighborhood and by Truscott and Smith's *The Village Voice* articles.

that Boom Boom has been thrown in paddy wagon after arguing with a cop at the door to the bar, and that Tim (the new gay on the block) had been “lost in the scuffle” (139-140). Jack charges offstage to help, and Murfino reports a smashed front window at the bar, and that the cops have had to barricade themselves inside (141-142). Jack eventually returns with a handcuffed Boom Boom (who has been helped by someone she calls “Miss Marsha” – either her nickname for Jack or another character that the audience doesn’t meet) and Timothy (144). Jack and Timothy excitedly describe more elements common to the riots: a growing crowd, coins being thrown at the cops, an upended car, fires being started, and *The Village Voice* siding with the cops (144-145).

Though all of this violence “could” be staged, Wilson instead focuses on only one moment of onstage violence. Seymour and Donovan return to the stage looking for the escaped Boom Boom, and Seymour grabs her. Ceil immediately cries out, “Set my sister free!” echoing the cries of “Save our sister!” that Carter reports. Ceil insults Seymour in the best way she knows how – “You know what your problem is?! Penis envy!” – which prompts Seymour to respond with violence:

(SEYMOUR releases BOOM BOOM, swings his nightstick at CEIL, hitting her in the face. CEIL falls to the pavement, the others back away. JACK and C.B. start forward to help, CEIL puts up her hand to stop them. CEIL gets up all by herself, turns to face SEYMOUR. There is blood trickling from the corners of her mouth.)

CEIL: *(To SEYMOUR.)* Satisfied, sweetie? Did you get your rocks off?

BOOM BOOM: *(Tossing her compact to CEIL.)* Miss Ceil, see to your
makeup.

CEIL: (*Catching the compact.*) Thanks, hon. (*CEIL, her eyes on SEYMOUR, opens the compact, daintily wipes the corner of her mouth.*)

(147)

The play moves towards its climax as Ceil asserts “This street belongs to us. [. . .] Me and my friends” (148). Seymour and Donovan, presumably cowed by her assertiveness and her group of friends standing together behind her, remain on stage spectating for the rest of the play, completely silent. Ceil’s defiance of Seymour is verbal (both before and after she is hit), but also physical. She is marked by Seymour’s violence, but strong enough to steel her emotions and to respond to Seymour in the most devastating way possible – by demonstrating how unaffected she is by his ridiculous action. As the only recipient of onstage physical violence in the entire play, it might be easy to read Ceil as a victim, but her reaction dispels such a notion. Though she appreciates the help of her friends, she demonstrates that she is anything but helpless – that she can clearly take care of herself. Ceil fights back with wit and style; by prioritizing her makeup over the man who just attacked her, she indicates just how little of threat or concern he is to her. Wilson selected this one moment of fighting back alongside reports of Heather, C.B., and Jack’s heroism to characterize the overall tone and substance of the queers’ response to violence at Stonewall: they fought back queerly.

As in *As Time Goes By*, the play’s one moment of onstage physical violence stands in symbolically for many instances of fighting back, and so there is considerable pressure for a production team not to mess it up. For Wilson’s violence to work as written, it seems to me that Ceil’s reaction to being hit can’t be played for laughs; while her response to violence – adjusting her makeup – is indeed counterintuitive and more

than a little bit queer, it is (and must be performed as) a bold, purposeful, and meaningful choice. Ceil has clearer agency and power than the drag queen in *As Time Goes By*, and her being hit by Seymour is not meant to reference the initiating instant of the fighting at Stonewall. Thus, no one rushes to Ceil's aid (she forbids it) or responds in a rage to her being attacked. Rather, their support for her is earned by her witty and stylish rejoinder, and her ability to confidently and queerly take care of herself and claim ownership of Christopher Street. Along these same lines, Seymour and Donovan, present for the remainder of the play, must be genuinely frightened of Ceil (and later, her comrades). Just as in Duberman's accounts of Deputy Inspector Pine's fright once forced back into the Stonewall Inn, Seymour and Donovan need to adequately convey a sense of surprise at the resistance they meet, and perhaps express downright terror. In *Street Theater's* final violent confrontation, a weak performance or a careless director could easily undo the serious work of Wilson's comedy.

Stonewall: Night Variations:

Tina Landau's *Stonewall: Night Variations* was created and performed to coincide with the celebrations for the 25th Anniversary of the Stonewall riots. The play – which has been alternately called a musical, a spectacle, and a pageant – was produced by the site-specific group En Garde Arts and staged on Pier 25 in lower Manhattan by Chambers Street. Dense, epic, and enormously difficult, the script draws from numerous sources in order to present and complicate the history of the Stonewall riots. The En Garde Arts production, which has been the only production to date, ran for four weeks beginning mid-June 1994, and featured nearly sixty performers, which allowed Landau to gesture

towards the scale of the riots in ways that *As Time Goes By* and *Street Theatre* are unable to do. More than anything else, Landau's play highlights the messiness of history by constantly providing her audience with overlapping and simultaneous action, dialogue, poetry, song, film clips and dance. She suggests that history is just a viewpoint, or a perspective of an event – one that takes on diminishing value as fact but enormous import as symbol. To that end, she draws on diverse text and techniques to stage *Stonewall*; the title page of her script reads “By Tina Landau with thanks to Walt Whitman, Sappho, Jean Genet, the Wizard of Oz, Andy Warhol, and the words and stories of many others.”¹⁷ Ben Brantley, among other critics, criticized the play for its bounty: “The problem is Ms. Landau simply has far too much of everything: too many stories; too many themes, from the problems gay men have committing to one partner to the changing nature of political activism in America, and too many oracular commentators” (L13). Though the critics at *The New York Times* and *The Village Voice* suggested that *Stonewall: Night Variations* is not always compelling drama, I argue throughout this section that it is certainly compelling historiography.

As the audience arrived at Pier 25, they were first greeted with a recording that said, “You are now entering Gay World,” and an actor playing a carnival Barker welcomed them to the event:

You are now at the edge of the city! –

¹⁷ Anne Hamburger (now, the Executive Vice President for Walt Disney Creative Entertainment) was the producer of *Stonewall Night Variations*, and Gregory Gunter was the dramaturg. The play has the feel of an incredibly well researched (though not necessarily well-edited) account of a historical event; many of the stories that Carter and Duberman cite are dramatized during the course of the play. John Istel, in his preview article called “Queen of the Carnival,” says that Landau encouraged her performers to bring in material for the production, and indicates the collaborative nature of the script and the play's (re)creation of Stonewall's history.

the far side, the fringe, the margin –
peer from the pier at the Lady of Liberty! –
You are now at the edge of the city –
A place where queers are kept and neatly hidden,
as far away as possible
from the rest of proper society!
What is perverted, what is forbidden –
Here, on this pier,
They have built their own world:
The village of Odds, not Oz, but O-D-D-S,
Here, on this pier,
They reenact the First Night so as not to forget
Because it is still happening
That is why they are here, after all,
At a safe distance! (5)

As prologue, the Barker's speech is indicative of the rest of the show; it is poetic, and it speaks to issues of space, of memory, of embodiment, and of the links between the past and the present. Though producer Anne Hamburger had initially located a warehouse in Tribeca to perform in, the local community board refused their proposal, citing noise, crowd, and security issues. In all probability, they weren't excited about their neighborhood being taken over every weekend by a large-scale production and an audience mostly drawn from the 25th Annual Gay Pride festival. Like the gay men and women in 1969 who had to claim space where they could (the dilapidated piers were

regularly used by gay men trying to connect with one another), *Stonewall: Night Variations* was pushed to the margins of the city. The Barker's claim that "they reenact the First Night so as not to forget / Because it is still happening" speaks to both the continued persecution of queers and to Landau's postmodern sense of history – that it is an ongoing act of negotiation and interpretation, a process that performance and reenactment allow.

Following the Barker's introduction, the audience is free to choose their own paths through a number of sideshow exhibits, small cages and stages that introduce the denizens of Greenwich Village. Landau's cast, obviously reflecting the continued project of opening up Stonewall's symbolism to all, emphasizes diversity: manly and effeminate men, butch and femme lesbians, drag queens of all shapes and sizes, and representatives of a number of different races and ethnicities.¹⁸ In their respective booths, many of the show's main characters enact minute-long scenes repeatedly; Landau's stage directions note: "*As we travel, we look in on their private lives. We peer in on moments that are intimate or interior or sexual. They are in bedrooms, backrooms, bathrooms, 'closets.'* All of these scenes have *TENSION IN THE AIR. Something is about to happen. Night is coming on*" (4). Landau leaves her audience to have their own subjective experiences, rather than a unified, ordered, prescribed description of precisely what led up to the riots. Eventually the audience arrives at the seating area, rows of bleachers in front of a stage.

¹⁸ Though the international effect of the Stonewall Riots is never explicitly investigated in the play, Landau notes in her script that their production also featured a "Suite" for foreigners "*in which they each (an Italian man, a Swedish woman, a Turkish man, a French man, an Israeli woman, a British woman, and a Japanese man, all of whom were in the cast) spoke in their native tongues and described their arrival in America and their sighting of the Statue of Liberty*" [8]). These internationals, then, are among those in Manhattan bearing witness to and seeking meaning from the Stonewall Riots, much like the International audience drawn to *Stonewall: Night Variations* during Pride 25.

The stage itself is a wide rectangular pit of sand; behind it, the two-story remains of an old driving range on the pier, which overlooks the Hudson River. An Angel Choir enters, pale and bald; Landau indicates that “*they watch over things and try to keep memory alive*” (2). Their leader sings, in a high falsetto, “Come out, come out, wherever you are, and join all the faggots tonight at the bar” (9). His summoning brings the play’s protagonists to the stage, and welcomes the audience to “join” the proceedings, an invitation to participate in the play’s project of making meaning of the Stonewall riots.

Apart from the Angels, the play is populated by actors playing the police, the mafia, the neighborhood gays, and a host of historical figures such as Andy Warhol and Ultra Violet, folk Deputy Inspector Seymour Pine, Ed Murphy (the real-life bouncer at the Stonewall Inn), and folk singer David Von Ronk.¹⁹ Even though most of these characters have no or very few lines during the course of the play, they help to establish a greater context for the summer of 1969, as well as give the audience a better idea of who might have been fighting in the riots. Having such a large cast of characters reduces some of the burden of representation that the characters in *As Time Goes By* and *Street Theatre* bear. Still, Landau’s main characters are not that different from the characters in those plays. Among the featured are Angelina “Chuck” Romano (a butch lesbian), Howie Raskin (a young, recent arrival to NYC), Matt Branfield (a hyper-masculine Vietnam-vet), Geneva (a bisexual Puerto Rican model who hangs out with Warhol’s gang), Eliot Shomberg (a closet-case and Judy Garland fanatic), Wanda N. Price (a stand-

¹⁹ David Von Ronk was one of the few that were named in the papers as having been arrested following the Riots. Though Von Ronk was straight and just trying to see what was happening at the riots, Pine and two other police officers dragged him into the Stonewall Inn (Carter 155-156).

in for Marsha P. Johnson), and Trish Philips (a NYU photography graduate student involved in the Women's movement). A final character, Francis Sinclair, is perhaps most indicative of the centrality of history to the play; he is described as "*the Rememberer; Queen of the Night; haunted, sickly; he is probably dead. Looks like a Butoh figure: completely shaven*" (1). During the pre-show, Francis sits motionless and haunted, with the Angel Choir behind him. During the play, he appears both as narrator and as himself in 1969, a sixteen-year-old heroin-addicted street hustler.

It is Francis, in his capacity as memory-keeper, who propels the plot forward. Following the Angels' entreaty to "come out," Francis says:

I remember I remember I remember – Five things. They happen fast. Accidents will happen, you see, Mary. No one knows for sure what happened when how can you? I mean there are never any photographs when you need them, no repository of sorts if you will – to hold memory I mean, nothing, in fact, except this this this this this . . . body. (*Holds up hand with two missing fingers*). (10)

Francis remembers the riots because he has to; quite literally, they are inscribed on his body, and stand in both as substitute for the pictures that were never developed,²⁰ and as rebuttal to anyone who argues that the violence of the Stonewall riots didn't have very real and material consequences. The "five things" that Francis remembers are flashes of

²⁰ In *Stonewall: Night Variations*, Trish arranges to meet Eliot in front of the Stonewall Inn to take his photograph for a series of portraits she is working on (7), but ends up using her camera to snap photographs of the riots instead, until a cop rips the film out of her camera. Enraged, she smashes her camera against a wall during the fight (49-50). In real life, Craig Rodwell returned to his apartment to retrieve his camera during the first night of the Riots. None of the photographs turned out (Duberman 200). As I mentioned in my introduction to this dissertation, one of the difficulties of studying Stonewall's history – and perhaps,

memory of the riots, visions that are fleeting and unclear. Like a lion tamer, the Barker cracks his whip and prompts these “five things” to materialize; he seeks to command and control history, as if it were a dangerous thing. Landau’s directions indicate, “*We meet the main characters, each with a specific gesture, later repeated in their film sequence, and with a theme song under*” (10). For instance, when the Barker cracks his whip and introduces Angie, she pulls her fist back in exaggerated fashion, as if drawing a bow, which the audience again sees during the actual riots as “the first punch.” As if to calm anyone in the audience who has become confused, the Barker and Francis together explain why they are telling the story as they are:

BARKER: Don’t despair. You really can’t see any one aspect very clearly; it’s like the tale of Rashomon.

FRANCIS: The legacy of this night is not in the facts, ladies and gentleman, but in the mythology . . . the metaphor . . . the mystery. The legacy is in the little moment, the turn of the head, the taking of a ring. Only hindsight can turn a simple gesture into history.

BARKER: Do the old ones remember? Do the young ones care?

FRANCIS: “The individual is the true register of events. Two hundred, one hundred, twenty five years later: Subjectivity is still a subversive act!” (12)

The Barker and Francis invite the audience to explore the bulk of the play – scenes on the streets, in the Stonewall Inn, during the raid, during the Stonewall riots and immediately

one of the reasons why live performances and reenactments are so useful – is the almost complete lack of photographic documentation of the riots.

following – as a subjective experience, what they suggest (and what Landau argues) is the most meaningful and politically efficacious approach to history.

Landau speaks to her own motivations for revisiting Stonewall twenty-five years later: “It’s important that we keep Stonewall alive as an emblem, as a metaphor, as a mythology—not as a fact of history—because we still need more tolerance, liberty, and love in the world” (Istel 104). Landau is invested in the symbolism of Stonewall, then, but not of conventional symbolic readings of Stonewall that locate it as the birth of gay liberation, or of victory against oppression. Rather, Landau seems to read Stonewall as an important reminder that things have been much worse than they are, and that they could become that way again. At the climax of the riots staged in *Stonewall: Night Variations*, the fighting freezes, and Billie, an “older dyke and mentor to Angie” (2), says: “Because there has been an increase in acceptance of gay people, those without historical perspective imagine this acceptance to be permanent and likely to increase with time. Unfortunately, tolerance is like the river tide. It reaches a high watermark and then can recede out of sight again” (50). In this one moment, Billie speaks ahistorically; she steps forward through time to speak to a potentially complacent audience, and in doing so, brings the symbol of Stonewall along with her. The anti-gay violence that climaxed in 1969 at Stonewall, she seems to suggest, will likely return in a similar guise again.

Towards the end of a play as intricate as *Stonewall: Night Variations*, and in the midst of a party like the twenty-fifth anniversary of the riots, such a concept articulated by a minor character might not stick out. However, Landau and company structure the play’s finale as both a celebration of queers through history and a cogent unmooring of the symbol of Stonewall. As “the dust settles” and characters attempt “to figure out what

to do next” (50), Trish tells her now out-and-proud friend Eliot, “Let’s go to the bars, we should get people out here tonight, out on the streets” (53). Her girlfriend Lisa shows up, which surprises Eliot, because he didn’t perceive Trish as lesbian. As conversation, the three begin listing queers past and present, and Francis recites Sappho: “Let me tell you this: someone in some future time will think of us” (54). One by one, the rest of the cast steps forward and says the name of a person from queer history, a roll-call of well over 200 names from Willa Cather and Rock Hudson to Hadrian and Queen Christina of Sweden. Here, Landau plays with the preoccupation in queer culture and queer histories of outing, of claiming important social, historical, political, and cultural contributions through the years as made by queer individuals. Eliot, Trish, Lisa, and the rest of the characters bring (the names of) people out to the streets, dragging these contemporary, historical, and future celebrities across Christopher Street. The resulting (seemingly endless) list of names is more than just a celebration of ownership; like Joan Nestle, Landau posits the prevalence of Stonewalls throughout history, and through such a catalogue of people, articulates how Stonewall belongs to everyone and all times. Through such a dramatic structure, Landau achieves her goal of warning against complacency while simultaneously offering a feel-good finale for her audience.

In his review titled “Politically Connect,” *The Village Voice*’s Michael Feingold notes:

It may be relevant that the list of homosexual heroes the cast recites over *Stonewall*’s closing anthem contains a number of names that don’t belong, heterosexuals whose clandestine love lives had nothing to do with

members of their own sex. [. . .] If everybody's queer just because rumor once said so, then why have a politics of queer identity at all? (85)

I actually find the play's list of names more effective knowing some heterosexuals slipped into the mix. Beyond just the fact that those listed may have been clear socially or politically (though not sexually), their names in the play's finale might suggest the importance of Stonewall as an event symbolic and meaningful for more than just gays and lesbians. In including these names (whether on purpose or not), Landau and company productively stretched the use of Stonewall even further; if Stonewall can cross geographic and chronological boundaries, then surely it can prove significant across lines of sexual identity as well.

Despite Landau's novel approach to opening up (rather than closing down) Stonewall's symbolic applications, the basic elements of the Stonewall story are all present, and more conventional interpretations of the riots' significance are available. Following the fighting, the stage directions indicate that people are looking for each other and taking care of one another. Change, as in a "for rent" sign that gets hung on the Stonewall Inn, is everywhere (51). Eliot observes: "I've never seen that . . . Boys and boys, girls and girls – hundreds of them all over – walking hand in hand and kissing on the piers" (52). Stonewall led immediately to shifts in public openness around homosexuality; *Stonewall: Night Variations* also focuses on some of the personal transformations that came about as a result of the riots. For instance, after a cop throws drag queen Wanda up against a wall, Landau indicates that "time stops," as Wanda says:

That's it, motherfucker. I've been a good girl long enough. Now the monster done woke up! [. . .] Violence is what you want – violence is what

we're gonna use, motherfuckers! And don't go tellin' me that violence is the work of the fuckin' Yippie radicals because you know that's a motherfucking lie! You're the motherfucker pigs coming into our bar, you're the bastards – you're the ones – bullshit morality code – you're the swine – you're the fascists – you're the fucking puppets give us the fucked-up capitalist system dog-eat-dog – You're the motherfuckers herd us in and out every night like cattle, not like people! We are people! We are people! Destroy the pigs until they serve the people!

(Wanda charges towards the bar with the meter as a battering ram. Cops grab at her. She fights back, fiercely. Other cops join in; it takes several to control her. They beat her.) (46)

Even though Wanda is brutally subdued by the cops, her speech describes the rage that awoke at Stonewall and the “fighting back” that would quickly engender a number of activist groups and newfound identities.

The violence of Stonewall also proves to be transformative for closet-case Eliot, who finally finds himself, as well as a community of others amidst the chaos. He says,

It was it was fantastic, Trish. I let loose – I felt this rush – a kind of, something I've never felt before – for an instant, in the great blackness, I thought I was a kid again, or a giant, running ahead of a storm, and you appeared and grabbed me by the hand – “Stick with me!” you cried “Till we die!” I cried. [. . .] And then I picked up that piece of wood and I looked up, and there it was – I saw it – the rainbow! *(He breaks down, in tears of relief and joy.)* It's going to be alright. (53)

Landau's script never addresses the issue of which side "won" the riots outright; such moments of elation and growth are balanced out by pain and loss, such as when Francis has his hand slammed in the car door. Yet even Francis, perhaps with the benefit of time and memory, is able to see the good in his own experience at Stonewall:

There is a light in this world, a healing spirit more powerful than any darkness we may encounter. We sometimes lose sight of this force when there is too much suffering, too much pain. Then suddenly, the spirit will emerge through the lives of ordinary people who hear a call and answer in extraordinary ways. (59)

His words, offered as a "coda" following the list of names, suggests another legacy of the riots – the ways that Stonewall enabled average people to do heroic things.²¹

Stonewall: Night Variation's biggest innovation is its representation of the riots themselves, fully performed in front of the audience. Rather than one chronological melee, however, Landau returns to Francis' five recollections – the brief gestures, images, and pieces of music that helped introduce the main characters. As the patrons of the Stonewall Inn are pushed out onto the street where a crowd grows and watches, Francis states: "The mind forgets, reports grow fuzzy, who roughed who, 'a street kid' while another claims a 'dyke' yet another 'three queens and a dyke,' while the cops are having trouble trying to load into the police car or was it a paddy wagon? – the mind forgets, the stories differ" (40). Landau, as critic Ben Brantley notices, eschews

²¹ During the listing of names, the Angels sing: "Of heroes, grant events / Of myths and poems, good intents, / Here on this beautiful and thick peopled earth / The few drops known / Must stand for oceans of the unknown. / Here on this beautiful and thick peopled earth, / The names we call / Must stand for the masses, the silent, the All" (55). Francis' final speech, then, makes clear the connection between the list of

identifying one moment, act, or person who “began” the riots. Again, Stonewall’s significance, Landau indicates, is not in the facts.²² Instead, the stage directions indicate that the riot gets presented “*five times from five different points of view*” (40), each accompanied by a crack of the Barker’s whip and his introduction of each story. At the culmination of the first vision of the riot, “*the door closes on Francis’ fingers*” (42), a result of him resisting two cops who hassle him and then steal his ring. Mid-way through the second vision, “*Geneva sees Angie throw the first punch. Elsewhere, at the same time, the door closes on Francis’ fingers*” (43). Through each iteration, the size of the riot grows: an accumulation of responses to individual instances of oppression. During the third vision, Wanda is brought out of the Stonewall, and she sasses the cops. Her friends, a group of drag queens, form a kick-line and sing the oft-remembered “We are the Village Girls, we wear our hair in curls,” which serves to anger a cop enough to throw Wanda into a wall. Enraged, “*Wanda uproots a parking meter in slow motion. Elsewhere, Geneva sees Angie throw the first punch – and the door closes on Francis’ fingers*” (46). The fourth vision of the riots is “The Love Story,” Vietnam-vet Matt’s hallucination/flashback wherein the violence of the riots becomes linked to the bloodshed in Vietnam. At the conclusion of this vision, “*Howie, young and beautiful and pure, appears as the Savior inside the nightmare. Matt walks to him, kisses him, and curls up*

celebrities and the unnamed (and literally, unsung) heroes of the Stonewall riots, a key point that Feingold neglects in his critique.

²² In addition to refusing to identify who began the riots on the first night, Landau is hesitant to articulate a singular reason for the riots. Instead, she presents most of the reasons that historians like Duberman and Carter indicate, and then let the audience assess their significance. For example, Eliot, a Judy Garland fan, watches a parade of the angel choir carrying a casket before the riots; Landau’s stage direction indicates “*no one else can see them*” (16). Landau illustrates that Judy Garland’s death and funeral were an important antecedent to the riots for Eliot, but perhaps not for anyone else; again, for Landau, history is subjective, and all a matter of perspective.

in his arms” (47). The final vision features Trish and Eliot witnessing the growing violence until they can witness no more; Eliot tries to help someone on the streets, and Trish takes photographs of the event, until a cop rips the film out of her camera. Again, the scene builds: “*STOP TIME: As Eliot raises the wood in the air, Trish smashes the camera, and Geneva sees Angie throw the first punch – and the door closes on Francis’ fingers – and Wanda turns on the cop*” (50). Following this fifth vision of the riots, the TPF enter in full riot gear, and rioters march in unison to meet them: “*THEN: Blasting away. People getting beat up. Police coming from every direction. Hitting women as well as men with their nightsticks. People running down the street. Windows shattering all over the place. Things burning all over the place*” (50). Even as the stage erupts in chaos, though, Landau pulls the riots back once more to a final, frozen image of those five visions occurring around the stage, as well as Billie’s reminder about the ebb and flow of tolerance. Landau’s representation of the riots is both circular and simultaneous, offering individual flashpoints – a body disfigured, a punch thrown, anger turning to action, a love discovered, an identity embraced – that are more ideas than facts: potential vantage points of Stonewall’s significance, all of which coexist without reducing one another. Though critics often cited the play as ineffective drama, *Stonewall: Night Variations*, especially in its refusal to posit origins or descent, is clearly an example of Foucault’s effective history.

Landau deviates from her pattern in the fourth vision, again suggesting the disorderliness of Stonewall’s historiography. Matt and Howie’s story, a dream ballet of sorts, doesn’t feature Wanda, Geneva and Angie, and Francis, as might be expected. Instead, Landau pauses in the midst of her Stonewall battle to stage Matt’s flashback to

Vietnam. During the scene, Matt speaks while another character, The Queen of Queens, “dances a beautiful ballet” and angels sing in the background (47). Matt narrates the violence that he saw all around him: “You can’t tell at first whether it’s a ballet . . . or it’s war. It was beautiful, it really was. Young bodies, full, striding through the fields like gazelles . . . muscles rippling . . . and ripping . . . Young bodies, full, falling, flying, floating through the air like feathers” (47). During the chaos of the final moments of Landau’s Stonewall riots, her stage directions echo Matt’s earlier speech: “*‘It was beautiful, it really was.’ This is the moment where violence and beauty meet. A war . . . and a ballet*” (50). In counterpoint, Landau has the performers who had previously been involved in the Stonewall riots reenact Matt’s vision: “*Men fall into the arms of other men. Matt walks among wounded and bleeding bodies. Men are holding each other cradled in their arms; they look like Pietas, except they are young boys, DQs, butches, etc. Blood and glitter mix, glimmer in the light*” (47). In structuring the scene this way, Landau elevates Stonewall from “skirmish” and “brawl” to “battle” and “war” – she explicitly connects Stonewall to the epic and seemingly endless Vietnam War.

Of course, Landau isn’t concerned here with the facts about the actual size and toll of the Stonewall riots. Rather, she is preoccupied with categorizing the legacy of the Stonewall riots as queer-kind’s legendary (and legend-worthy) struggle, one which is ongoing. Matt’s vision also presents as subject the aesthetic properties of violence. The staged violence in much of *Stonewall: Night Variations* is big, messy, and frenzied, but in this scene, Landau pauses to highlight moments of beauty amidst the pain and suffering. The Queen of Queens’ ballet, the images of queer Pietas, and the combination of blood and glitter serve to complicate essentialist notions of “violence is bad,” and to

characterize the actions of those putting their bodies in the way of violence at Stonewall as beautiful and productive. Matt goes on to say that “You can’t quite tell at first whether it’s Heaven . . . or it’s Hell. It was beautiful, it really was. And you think that all the ones you’ve known and loved are somehow there, at your side, in your arms” (47).

Matt’s description of “all the ones you’ve known and loved” foreshadows the lists of names at the end of the play, the list of the famous throughout history who come to stand in for the countless unknown names of others who have struggled. Landau activates Stonewall as a symbol of queers taking care of one another, displaying courage and generosity, both during the fighting and as fighting. Though this theme manifests itself in sporadic moments of kindness and beauty throughout the play, Landau distills it to its essence in this fourth vision by focusing on the intersections of aesthetics and violence, of finding beauty in the spectacle of war.

Landau’s choreography and structure of the five variations of the riots highlight the complexity, the chaos, and the joy to be found in the violence at Stonewall. They also reemphasize her own take on history – that it is ultimately unknowable, yet still worthy of scrutiny, especially as a means of reevaluating the present. As I watched (and re-watched) the choreography on video, I did notice the messiness, if not downright sloppiness of the staged violence.²³ Punches failed to “read” as punches, revealing themselves as “staged” to the audience repeatedly. Similarly, moments where characters wielded weapons also seemed fake. For a production seeking to represent a lengthy fight,

²³ Vincent Canby notes in his review, “Celebrating a Birthday and a Battle,” that he assumes Landau has choreographed the production because there is no mention of a choreographer in the program. Similarly I’ve found no mention of anyone responsible for the fight choreography within the production, so I assume the result was a combination of Landau’s direction and choreography, along with the collaborative efforts of the actors bringing bits and pieces of knowledge about the discipline with them.

being performed in sand, and perhaps being choreographed collaboratively, this isn't all that surprising. As a result, however, it doesn't allow the satisfying realism of staged (or filmed) violence that most audiences have come to expect. The simultaneity and the lack of technique make for a certain fuzziness of the violence, but also give it a sort of amateurish quality; the idea of violence (and beauty amidst the violence) is there, though is not always well-executed. The more I watched the video, though, the more I suspected that Landau left the violence staged this way on purpose – that she refused to stage the fights realistically, and instead wanted to highlight the fight's staged nature, that it is in effect, just a representation, or as the Barker described it, a reenactment of history, rather than the history itself. Though Michael Feingold interpreted the “variations” of the play's title to be “Landau's defense of the work's tendency to crumble into bits” (85), I actually enjoyed the play's refusal to bow to the exigencies of conventional drama. I find her five visions of the riots and the play as a whole to be an intelligent historiographic intervention into the Stonewall riots, as well as a productive variation on traditional modes of representing violence.

Harvey Milk

The opera *Harvey Milk*, which had its world premiere at the Houston Grand Opera on January 21, 1995, is “a biographical opera based on fact and fiction” (ii). The opera's “fact” is culled from the life of Harvey Milk, one of the country's first elected gay public officials, who was assassinated on November 27, 1978, after serving just eleven months as a City Supervisor in San Francisco. The opera's “fiction” comes from composer Stewart Wallace and librettist Michael Korie's dramaturgy, which stretches or

alters history as necessary to investigate the mythology of Milk's life and death. Among the boldest decisions that Wallace and Korie make in their opera is the choice to conclude their first act with Harvey Milk fighting back alongside others at the Stonewall riots. In the opera, the scene that documents Milk's presence at Stonewall is a charged and formative series of moments that show him literally and figuratively coming out of the closet, becoming a gay activist willing to stand up for himself and others, and falling in love with longtime lover and partner Scott. It's wonderfully effective drama, of course: a spectacle-filled way to end the opera's first act. And Wallace and Korie smartly dramatize the forging of a gay hero amidst the fires and chaos at Stonewall. Harvey Milk's presence at the Stonewall riots, however, is pure invention – one of the “fictions” of the opera. Though Milk had been living in Manhattan on and off for years, he had most likely moved to San Francisco by the time of the riots.²⁴

The first act of *Harvey Milk*, titled “The Closet,” features a fifteen year old Harvey standing at the back of the Old Metropolitan Opera House, wondering who all the strange men are who “stand in public and cry” (5). Curious to find out, Young Harvey follows a man in a trench coat from the opera to Central Park, where he observes a large number of men in the park after midnight. The man in the trench coat reveals himself to be a cop, slaps a pair of handcuffs on Young Harvey, and leads him offstage. Twenty-four years pass, and the adult Harvey is revealed in his “Walk-In Closet” apartment, still

²⁴ Milk is only mentioned in passing in Duberman and Carter as Craig Rodwell's lover in the early 1960s. (In addition to being one of Duberman's protagonists, Rodwell also appears as one of the three lovers in the “Harvey's Walk-In Closet” scene of the opera). In *The Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, biographer Randy Shilts never explicitly denies that Milk was at Stonewall, but seems to indicate that Milk was living in San Francisco living with cast members of the musical *Hair* (39). When Shilts pauses Milk's narrative for three pages to gloss the Stonewall Riots, he doesn't mention Milk's presence in them at all (41-43).

handcuffed, and very closeted. Squeezing into his cramped closet with him are three lovers and three queer friends, all of whom are miserable and hopeless. On the street, he meets and exchanges campy, sexual banter with Scott, a young activist who chastises him for not standing up for himself more. Milk asks him out, “Your place or mine?” to which Scott responds, “Christopher Street. It’s brick-throwing time, Harvey Milk. Midnight, at The Stonewall Bar. This time, let’s go to jail for us. Is it a date?” (13). Fearing exposure and protesting that he could lose his job, Harvey instead returns to the Opera, where he puzzles over his own inner contradictions: “I’m 39 years old. I stand up for myself as a Jew. Why not as a man who loves men?” (14). During the opera, he has a vision of men and women in concentration camp uniforms, with yellow stars and pink triangles; Harvey comes to the conclusion that “My star is a pair of triangles: one pink, one yellow. They overlap as I do. I am one person. I am just one person but I have power. I remember who I am” (15). To the sound of glass breaking – his own *Kristallnacht* – Harvey lifts his hands above his head and snaps his handcuffs apart, whereupon he finds himself caught up in the middle of the Stonewall riots. The first act of *Harvey Milk* charts Harvey’s journey from closeted queen to out-and-proud gay activist, as well as dramatizing the reconciliation of his Jewish and gay identities. Christopher Street, then, is his proving-ground, whereupon the Stonewall riots encourage and enable his very first moments of gay activism.

The entirety of Wallace and Korie’s Stonewall scene takes less than ten minutes to stage; their version of the Stonewall story presents the barest essentials – just enough to provide the inspiration and environment for Harvey’s transformation to take place. The “who fought back” question of their Stonewall is easily answered. The libretto

indicates that “*Impoverished Street Drag Queens face off with the cops*” (16), along with at least three lesbians, Scott, and Harvey.²⁵ The “what happened” issue is slightly more difficult to assess. In the Houston production of the Opera, the set featured seven doors on the stage right wall. As Harvey breaks his handcuffs, cops come and pound on the doors, upon which queens burst out of the doors repeatedly singing “Cops and Mafia out of the bars!” (16). As they face off with the cops upstage, Cop 1 hits Harvey with a nightstick and knocks him to the ground, and then shouts instructions to the other cops: “All right, you know the routine. Men dressed as men – book ‘em, release ‘em. Men dressed as women – arrest ‘em. Dykes – book ‘em overnight” (16). Upstage, a dyke steps forward, “*thrusting her fist in the air*” and shouts, “Gay Power!” (17), a cry that is taken up by three other lesbians.²⁶ As a melee erupts upstage, Cop 1 hits Harvey a second and third time, and then holds his nightstick in Harvey’s face threateningly. Harvey rises defiantly, grabs the nightstick, and swings it in a full circle, causing the cop to retreat upstage to a newly arrived group of police with shields and helmets. The cop threatens, “Get back or we shoot!” to which the crowd responds, “Liberate Stonewall!” (17). Harvey spots Scott in the chaos, and tosses him the nightstick. Scott raises it above his head, shouts, “You think homosexuals are revolting?” and then sings, “Bet your sweet

²⁵ More chorus members join, and likely, some of them were women; the poor quality of the archival video at the Houston Grand Opera makes it difficult to say for sure. The libretto seems to emphasize, though, that the majority involved were the Village drag queens who made Stonewall and the streets their home.

²⁶ Oddly, this representation of the Stonewall Riots seems uninterested in the question of “who began it?” The libretto suggests that the police chase after and subdue the Dyke who shouts “Gay Power,” throwing her in a police car and angering the rioters (17). Interestingly, nowhere does the libretto suggest that she throws “the first punch.” Though bits of this chase might have been staged in Houston Grand Opera’s production, they were largely unidentifiable on video. As best I could tell, Harvey is among the first to be hit shortly after the scene begins, though there is no attempt to belabor the issue or posit Harvey as the reason why the queers rioted in the first place. *Harvey Milk* is one of the few representations of Stonewall that makes no mention of Judy Garland or her funeral whatsoever.

ass we are!” The crowd replies, “Christopher Street belongs to the queers!” as the cops hastily exit, and the queers’ victory is only briefly marred with Cop 1’s shouted claim, “We’ll be back for you, faggots!” (17-18).

Director Christopher Alden’s staging of this scene is the antithesis of Landau’s; it feels crowded on the Houston stage, and not at all epic in size or duration. He banishes much of the scuffle to upstage, so that the downstage exchange between Harvey and Cop 1 can be seen clearly. During the fighting, the lights are dim, and so only occasional moments and images can be picked out of the riots: a burning trashcan, a Molotov cocktail being thrown, drag queens and cops crashing against one another.²⁷ What’s clearly important in this Stonewall battle is that Harvey Milk was there, was on the receiving end of violence, and stood up for himself and others. There are no moments of demonstrating the stylish and courageous acts that many Stonewall historians report – except for Scott’s witty pun on “revolting” – or the beauty inherent in moments of violence. There are no elements of fun or silliness on display during the battle; their fighting is serious work. The drag queens aren’t dragged squealing from the Stonewall Inn, but have the agency to rush forth and engage the cops. Wallace and Korie paint their Stonewall as a simple and unquestionable victory for the queers, a fight generating pride for the street queens, dykes, and other rioters who demonstrate that they are able to take care of themselves. Since *Harvey Milk* is, as the name implies, an opera about Harvey Milk, it makes sense that little time or energy is given to exploring the mythology of

²⁷ Michael Kirkland’s Stonewall fight choreography, when it can be seen through the dim lighting, is realistic (and well rehearsed). As opposed to the haphazard and stylized fights of *Stonewall: Night Variations*, the audience isn’t privy to the artifice of stage combat.

Stonewall. Rather, the focus is on Harvey, who is finally able to join his brethren in the fight – and the movement – that is already in progress.²⁸

For Wallace and Korie, the riots at Stonewall are less important than the activism and celebration of queer identity that they enable. Only once the cops have exited do “*The Drag Queens erupt in a spontaneous celebration*” (18); they mark their acquisition of Christopher Street with song and dance. A kick-line of seven drag queens sings an extended version of “We are the Stonewall Girls / We wear our hair in curls,” while the remaining rioters form a conga line that winds around upstage. Half-way through their boisterous song-and-dance, Scott and Harvey find each other and kiss down stage center. The conga line joins the kick-line, and a group of over twenty rioters form one big kick-line, a back-drop to the consummation of Scott and Harvey’s relationship in a prolonged embrace. Suddenly, the rioters cease their campy partying and return to singing “Out of the closets and into the streets!” (19). As they do so, they literally dismantle the closet doors on stage left (which also functioned as the doors of the Stonewall Bar) and drag them offstage. Oblivious to all of this, Harvey and Scott passionately make their way to the ground, lustily rolling upstage over one another as the closets are being broken apart all around them. Once Harvey and Scott are alone, they agree to “Remember this moment. This warm night in June. The rage and fire in the streets this evening like a midnight sunrise eclipsing the moon” (19). The beginning of their relationship together

²⁸ Scott’s invitation to Harvey to join him at Christopher Street for “brick-throwing time” suggests that perhaps the Riots of *Harvey Milk* were not the “First Night” of fighting that Landau’s play documents, but rather the fights that took place on Saturday or Wednesday night. The libretto also indicates that “*Scott slips a flyer into Harvey’s handcuffed hand*” (13), though that action is absent from the video recording. Wilson and Korie emphasize that Harvey doesn’t start the Riots or the gay liberation movement, but rather, he joins them.

(as veterans of Stonewall, if not its heroes) converges with the dawning of a new chapter in gay liberation.²⁹

Wallace and Korie make clear distinction between the raucous and camp post-Stonewall partying by the rioters, and their more serious, activist work. Though many histories (and other representations) of the riots indicate that the “Stonewall Girls” song and kick-line happened mid-riot on both of the first two nights in the Village, *Harvey Milk* portrays them as distinct from the fighting, as celebration. Many of Houston Grand Opera’s production choices, such as bumping the lights to full just for the duration of that song and dance, also highlight the difference in these moments. As the rioters begin dismantling the closets, the kick-line abruptly ceases and the lights again dim. One available interpretation of these choices is that Wallace and Korie’s *Harvey Milk* resists seeing those fighting at Stonewall as merely “hysterical faggots,” and instead chooses to parse out their actions that night. At first, the opera shows them fighting (and winning) through conventional physical violence, then claiming and consecrating their newfound space on the street theatrically, and finally, ordering their own lives and beginning to organize their movement: tearing down their own personal closets while calling for other queers to do the same. The queers at Wallace and Korie’s Stonewall are a competent and formidable lot; they know precisely when to fight, when to play, and when to work. Instead, the queerness of their fighting is located in their diverse arsenal of responses to

²⁹ The stage directions in the libretto indicate that “*The walls behind them break apart to reveal a blazing white light as the moon is eclipsed by the sun. Alone on stage, Harvey and Scott turn their backs to the audience to face the blinding light. We see that the back of Harvey’s white shirt is stained with blood. They walk together into the path of the sun*” (19). That this is a pivotal moment in Harvey’s life, in his relationship with Scott, and in the fledgling gay liberation movement is crystal clear, as is the fact that he’s been marked at Stonewall, changed by his participation. The sun that they walk towards, of course, is also

oppression. A second (more ominous) interpretation of these textual and production choices is also available. The sudden switch to the campy atmosphere immediately following the riots could be a brief projection into the future, a miniature dream ballet of sorts, where the Drag Queens imagine and wish for a post-Stonewall future free of violence and free of struggle. As the song and dance ends, however, they return to the hard work of post-Stonewall gay liberation, decades of contentious and quarrelsome labor that the opera's audience knows will be far from easy. Further haunting the celebration is Cop 1's threat, "We'll be back for you, faggots!" This proves eerily true in Harvey's case when nine years later he is assassinated by Dan White, an ex-cop.³⁰

That the queers at Stonewall win in this version is no great surprise. As symbol, Harvey needs a victory – a triumph that he vows (with Scott) to remember, and which he will carry with him into his political career. Harvey bursts out of his own closet, and in subsequent public appearances as a gay activist (both in the play and in real-life), he will return again and again thematically to the necessity of coming out. Harvey's own exodus from the closet is triply signified in *Harvey Milk*: first, when he breaks his handcuffs just prior to the riots, second, when he fights (and is injured) alongside other gays and lesbians, and third, when he consummates his relationship with Scott during and

significant as Harvey and Scott leave the streets of Manhattan for the sunnier (and queerer) climate of San Francisco; in the Houston Grand Opera production, the sun blazed pink.

³⁰ Dan White later sings about being an ex-cop (38), which in real-life was central to his being elected, as well as to receiving such a light sentence for his killing of Harvey Milk and Mayor George Moscone. In the opera, the undercover vice cop who arrested young Harvey, according to the script, is also played by the performer in Dan White's role (8). No such note is included in the libretto for Cop 1 during the Stonewall scene, though it hardly matters; by the time of the Riots, the police, the Nazis, and Dan White have all been connected for the audience. And of course, productions could still choose to double those actors; the Houston premiere may have done so, though the archival recording was inconclusive on this matter. Interestingly, in "Queer Music," Clum describes that Wallace borrowed some chords from the opera *Tosca*, and at the end of each opera, "the police still win" (119).

immediately after the riots. Another dimension of Harvey's interlude with Scott is that neither the libretto nor the original production indicates that they return to an apartment; their feelings of love and lust for each other are declared and carried out in public, on the very streets where the Stonewall riots had just been fought. At Stonewall, the exhilaration of queer love is coupled with the joys of coming out and fighting back, and Harvey brings such symbolism and resonances of Stonewall with him into his future as a politician. Though Wallace and Korie seem to have little to add to the history and legend of the Stonewall riots, they clearly feel that the Stonewall Riots have much to offer the mythology of Harvey Milk. More literally than in the litany of names that Tina Landau uses in the finale of *Stonewall: Night Variations*, Wallace and Korie invoke and activate the power of the Stonewall symbol by actually inserting the object of their historical inquiry into the riots themselves. Though such a decision may "mislead" anyone who attempts to read *Harvey Milk* as pure docudrama, Wallace and Korie's fictional account of the Stonewall riots gives profound context for Milk's trademark pride and preoccupation with coming out as a way of fighting back against the violence of conservative regimes.

Conclusion / (re)staging Stonewall:

I believe as John D'Emilio suggests in *The World Turned* that though Stonewall's "importance is not debatable, its meaning is most definitely up for grabs. As with all myths and symbols, we do more than retell and remember it. We *interpret* it. We extract lessons from the event and in doing so, shape an understanding of the past and the present" (148). *As Time Goes By*, *Street Theater*, *Stonewall: Night Variations*, and

Harvey Milk all give audiences the opportunity to interpret weighty issues of violence, identity, memory, and origin. Each story is admittedly incomplete, and like any given character's view of the riots in Duberman or Carter's books, seems to clamor for other voices telling their own Stonewall legends alongside it. Though each of these works are clever and compelling in their own right, they perhaps best approach effective history – and best enable a nuanced understanding of the centrality of (queer) violence to the Stonewall riots – when heard in chorus with one another.

*

Witnessing – Most theatrical representations of the riots focus on characters who took part in the fighting; in doing so, these works miss an opportunity to stage the fact that many present at Stonewall were just watching. How can those of us staging the queer violence at Stonewall also portray a “witnessing” of the riots, and what meanings could such a choice signify? Placing characters onstage to watch the fighting could foreground the historical importance and the epic scale of the event; perhaps, as the title of D’Emilio’s book indicates, “the world turned” that first night. Alternately, characters added to the scene who don’t watch – who have their backs turned – could properly contextualize the fact that few outside of the queer community took any notice of the Stonewall riots. Like the question of “who was there?” the question of “who was watching?” is also interesting. Which people or characters throughout history had their lives touched by Stonewall, and how could placing them as witnesses of the riots make meaning? What if Oscar Wilde watched the riots? Dan White? Ellen DeGeneres? Matthew Shepard? Ronald Regan? Anita Bryant?

*

A Draw – Theatrical representations of violence almost always feature a winner, yet Stonewall’s dense historiography suggests no clear-cut physical victory for the queers. Leaving the winner at Stonewall unresolved forces the characters and the audience to define for themselves what constitutes a victory. Furthermore, it would ask them to consider whether the injuries that resulted from the event, the damage to public and private property (including some queer-friendly businesses), and the possibility of anti-gay backlash were all worth it.

*

Claiming Space – It would be productive in staging queer violence to emphasize how acts of violence often center on gaining and controlling space. In the case of the Stonewall riots, there was a brief exchange of space – the cops were forced to retreat into the Stonewall Inn – and in the aftermath of the riots, there was a newfound openness for queers on the streets. It’s one thing to say or sing “Christopher Street belongs to the Queers,” but I wonder how the choreography of violence might actually demonstrate this. As just one example, the “Stonewall Girls” song and accompanying chorus-line could be choreographed to involve gaining actual and symbolic ground. Rather than singing and dancing in place, what would an advancing kick-line of queens singing loudly and proudly signify? What if the kick-line wasn’t just staged as a response to violence, but as a violent physical act itself? How could those performers in the kick-line be choreographed to actually kick the police in their path, or to spread out and control the entirety of the stage and the neighborhood it represents? Such choreography would

illustrate the dynamic ways that queers access violence and navigate urban space, both in the past and present.

Chapter 2: Staging Gay Martyrdom

In stark contrast to the endless debates over the symbolism, implications, and ownership of the Stonewall riots, assessments of the assassination of San Francisco City Supervisor Harvey Milk and the brutal slaying of Laramie, Wyoming, resident Matthew Shepard have been markedly unified. Since their deaths, far more often than not, both men have been elevated – or reduced – to martyrdom, both in queer and mainstream forums. This chapter pursues the logic and significance behind such an interpretative phenomenon, attempting to understand the rhetorical or affective strategy of attributing such status to these men.

One key feature of tropes of martyrdom is the slippage between various martyr figures; for instance, in martyrdom, Milk and Shepard's experiences blend into one another, and come to stand in for all gay hate crime victims everywhere.³¹ Such slippage can be politically and emotionally efficacious, of course, though it also problematically obscures the individuality and diverse achievements of each. Still, as a response to horrible acts of violence, sometimes we need martyrs – to mourn and memorialize those who've been lost, to inspire us to action, and to help understand our own embodied relationship to violence and mortality. To explore the interconnectedness of martyr-figures and hate crime victims, I begin this chapter with my own personal reception of

³¹ However, not all hate crime victims similarly entered the public sphere and become lionized as martyrs. For example, Brandon Teena briefly became the poster child for transgender issues following his horrific rape and death at the hands of his friends when they discovered that he was biologically female. Despite much media coverage, two films about his story, and a substantive body of excellent scholarly work about his life and death (see Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings* and Judith Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place*), he has seldom been described as a martyr. While many aspects of an analogy to Jesus Christ's death still hold up, I believe that Teena's transgender identity, in tandem with his lower class background and his criminal record, rendered him a far less palatable or marketable candidate for martyrdom than Milk and Shepard.

productions of two plays that explore anti-gay violence and martyrdom: Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi* and Moisés Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Project's *The Laramie Project*. I believe that my auto-ethnographic account demonstrates the seductive nature of such easy symbolism, as well as the productive mourning and healing that such representations can facilitate.

I then examine Harvey Milk and Matthew Shepard's lives and legacies through some of the many books, essays, and articles that their untimely deaths prompted. Some journalists and scholars have already pointed to the tendency of their colleagues to carelessly or unreflectively label Milk and Shepard as martyrs. My historiographic intervention into this sizable body of literature is to reveal the absolute dominance of this martyr-discourse, a method of telling these stories that is so prominent in the social sphere that it becomes difficult to conceive of Milk and Shepard in any other way. Such analysis carries over into my reading of how stage and screen representations of Milk and Shepard encourage, if not overdetermine, such a singular way of making sense of their murders. Because martyrdom is typically constituted through moments of violence, I pay particular attention to works that actually dramatize Milk and Shepard's deaths: Dan Pruitt and Patrick Hutchison's 1991 musical *The Harvey Milk Show*, Stewart Wallace and Michael Korie's 1995 opera *Harvey Milk*, the 2001 MTV movie *Anatomy of a Hate Crime*, and the 2002 NBC movie *The Matthew Shepard Story*.³² Though I continue to believe in the generative potential of staging moments of violence, I find that the violence

³² Emily Mann's play *Execution of Justice* (1984) portrays the trial of Dan White, Milk's killer; Moisés Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Company's *The Laramie Project* (2000) focuses its narrative on the residents of Laramie, Wyoming. In this chapter, I don't analyze Mann's play at all and only briefly touch upon one production of *The Laramie Project* because neither attempts to dramatize the hate crimes that make the martyrdom trope so readily accessible.

in these four works accomplishes little but the reiteration of the martyr trope; their choreography offers no new insights into Milk and Shepard's lives and deaths, and we learn nothing new about the nature of violence itself.

In "A Troubling Vision of Matthew Shepard," Michael Bronski responds to viewers who were upset by a November 2004 *20/20* program that presented the "real facts" about Matthew Shepard, and in doing so, sullied his claim to martyrdom. Bronski writes,

Matthew Shepard was human and no one who is human can be completely, perfectly innocent. If the need to define hate crimes, and to argue against homophobic violence, means we have to extract them from the complicated fabric of everyday life, then we are all in trouble – more trouble than *20/20* can ever cause with this exposé. (Bronski)

Following Bronski, I argue in this chapter for a historiography that continues to humanize martyr figures, a story-telling mode that grounds the symbolism to be found in their deaths within the context of their life's achievements. Doing so ensures that Milk and Shepard never become complete fictions. Thus, throughout this chapter, I tentatively celebrate the public feelings and resulting activism that martyr tropes enable. Yet I conclude this chapter by arguing that if we are going to bother staging martyrdom, we might as well do so in ways that portray both the myth and the man, and which open up and challenge our critical faculties rather than shut them down.

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Matthew Shepard was savagely attacked and left for dead on October 6th, 1998. I didn't find out until much later, as I was simultaneously out of the country – studying in

Edinburgh, Scotland – and still very much in the closet. I was trying to convince myself I'd fallen in love with Gemma, a Sally-Bowles-esque woman from Salisbury. Coverage of all things Shepard dominated the American news for weeks; somehow, only occasionally catching a glimpse of the BBC between rehearsals for *She Stoops to Conquer* and pints of McEwans at Greyfriar's Pub, I missed it. Such widespread news coverage of Shepard's death later led sociologists to study a ripple effect – how other gays and lesbians have subsequently reordered their own lives because of this moment of tremendous rupture in American history.

†

Corpus Christi, a play about Joshua, a gay Christ-like figure, opened amidst protests in New York City on October 13th, 1998, the very day after Shepard was pronounced dead. These protests in many ways resembled those that would take place at Matthew Shepard's funeral, as well as at the trial of his murderers, Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney. Police divided demonstrators into two groups: a vocal anti-gay, anti-*Corpus Christi* gathering with signs that declared McNally's play and homosexuality in general a blight on society (not unlike "Matthew in Hell" and "Die Fags" signs at Shepard-related gatherings), and a more silent group supporting McNally, queer politics, and the freedom of expression. All this followed a tumultuous few weeks in which the Manhattan Theatre Club (MTC) canceled their production of *Corpus Christi* because of multiple bomb and death threats; one anonymous caller went so far as to vow to exterminate the author, the staff, and the play's audiences, and to burn the theatre to the ground. The Catholic League led the conservative charge in the mainstream media, ironically calling McNally's play "hate speech," noting they were offended with the

suggestion that Christ was gay and had sex with all of his apostles (which doesn't actually happen in the play). The production was reinstated in the season only after playwrights like Tony Kushner, Craig Lucas, and Athol Fugard, and New York City arts community members publicly objected. Opening night went largely as planned, reviews for the play were mixed, and a metal detector remained installed in the theatre for the play's entire run.³³

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The European premiere of *Corpus Christi* opened at the Bedlam Theatre at the Edinburgh fringe festival in August 1999, again surrounded by predictable protests and bomb threats. I worked security at the event, routinely checking the bathroom stalls for bombs (as if I would have known what to do if I had found one), and remained on hand to generally look menacing and protect the peace. Pastor Jack Glass and his Free Church of Scotland publicly condemned the play because in it, the Son of God is a gay man, speaking remarkably similar wisdom to that found in the Bible. Plus, McNally's Joshua blesses gay marriages, which annoyed these conservative Scots quite a lot. At its opening, seventy-odd protesters arrived carrying banners inscribed with anti-gay slogans (such as the now tired "Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve"), sang hymns, and laid hands on the church that housed the Bedlam Theatre to once again purify it. One man threatened that an act of God would prevent the curtain from going up. A group of us theatre employees had thirty silver pieces symbolically and forcefully lobbed at us;

³³ For more on the American premiere of *Corpus Christi*, see Charles McNulty's "The Last Temptation of MTC," Sharon L. Green's *Theatre Journal* review, and the entry for Terrence McNally in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 249: Twentieth-Century American Dramatists*.

apparently we too had betrayed Jesus Christ by allowing the show to go on. Opening night went largely as planned, reviews for the play were mixed, and I continued to work security at the theatre, seeing the play twice. The media was more invested in the demonstrations than the play itself, even though on many days, only a solitary old man with a placard featuring a quote or two about Sodom and the book of Leviticus showed up. Unsurprisingly, most protesters didn't even see the show.³⁴

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The production company had obtained permission to reprint McNally's introduction to the play in the program, and it is there that I read about Matthew Shepard for the first time, forever intertwining my reception of those two events. McNally notes:

At the same time that we were all feeling so good about overcoming these forces of ignorance and prejudice [the New York City protests, MTC nearly closing the production and then reinstating it as part of their season], a young man in Laramie, Wyoming, by the name of Matthew Shepard was losing his life to them. Beaten senseless and tied to a split rail fence in near-zero weather, arms akimbo in a grotesque crucifixion, he died as agonizing a death as another young man who had been tortured and nailed to a wooden cross at a desolate spot outside Jerusalem known as Golgotha some 1,998 years earlier. They died, as they lived, as brothers. Jesus Christ did not die in vain because His disciples lived to

³⁴ I marry my own recollections of the Edinburgh protests and production details with information contained in the reviews of major British newspapers, all of which are collected in *Theatre Record*, volume 19.

spread His story. It is this generation's duty to make certain Matthew Shepard did not die in vain either. We forget this story at the peril of our very lives. (vi)

Reading the program, I suddenly felt that I had committed more of a sin by not bearing witness – not having known about Matthew's death – than if I had merely forgotten the event. I felt strangely adrift for one of the first times in my eleven months of living in Scotland – here was a major event in American history that had happened, and somehow it hadn't even appeared on my cultural radar. Was this because tragic murders take place worldwide every day? Or because another gay man getting bashed in America isn't newsworthy on an international level? Though I wasn't out yet, why didn't any of my friends or family members at least casually gloss this important news-item for me? Did my ignorance of Matthew's plight make me a selfish person, too wrapped up in my own scholarship, theatre practice, and travel plans? Like many theatre critics and scholars, I would later question McNally's strategic analogizing of Matthew Shepard and Jesus Christ. At the time, however, I appreciated this wake-up call that the program notes provided, even as they filled me with anxiety, discomfort, and great sadness.

†

Though the protesters and the program brought me angst, the production of *Corpus Christi* itself brought me great joy. Even while I watched the play I knew that it was no masterwork – no *Angels in America*, for example – and yet I was willing to overlook the play's shortcomings: its gimmicky nature, its occasional misogyny, its over-reliance on camp, its statement of the obvious. This play hailed me on so many levels

that in that moment of spectatorship and every moment since, *Corpus Christi* has held tremendous meaning for me.

The play opened with a group of thirteen actors entering the stage from the stage door, the aisles of the theatre, and the dressing rooms. They greeted each other with their own names, and stepped onto the stage that had been my emotional home away from home for the last year. These actors, soon to be disciples, literally walked the same roads and trod the same boards that I had. One by one, they stepped forward and introduced their characters and their characters' professions before being blessed and baptized into their roles by the actor who played John. One actor stepped forward and introduced himself as Thomas, an actor within the world of the play (before he gave up that career to follow Joshua). He stated:

I'm an actor. I mean Thomas is an actor. I'm an actor, too, of course, but you know that or you wouldn't be paying good money or even no money to sit there and listen to me tell you I'm someone else, in this case the ever popular and appealing Thomas. It's called the willing suspension of disbelief—or in certain cases the unwilling suspension of disbelief. I've seen audiences fight a play for an entire performance. At the end of the evening, they're exhausted. So are we. I bet even the ushers and the stagehands are feeling the fatigue. Why do that to yourself? Or us? We want to take you someplace beautiful, someplace thrilling, someplace maybe you've never been before. Come with us. At least meet us halfway. (4)

Despite the fact that I was exhausted from seeing three or four fringe festival performances a day (many of which were awful) on top of managing protesters and winos at the Bedlam, it never occurred to me to actively resist the play's form or message. For an hour and a half, I ignored the skeptical theatre critic in me and followed these actors and disciples as they told Joshua's story – and Matthew's.

They did, in fact, take me “someplace beautiful, someplace thrilling, someplace maybe [I'd] never been before.” I couldn't help but notice these thirteen men, both as actors and as characters, as they traversed McNally's play, touching, comforting, and caring for one another. That each of them was drop-dead gorgeous certainly helped; I found it strangely appropriate that the actor who played Judas, Stephen Billington, was a recognizable British soap opera star. Yet though there was sexual energy and tension throughout the play, the protesters and the Catholic League had gotten it wrong – this wasn't a play about sex, but about contact and companionship, about loving and holding your fellow man. Confused about my own sexuality, a continent away from both my home in the Pacific Northwest and from Laramie, Wyoming, a city that had just been put on the map for me, I wanted nothing more to be loved and to be held. Though not out yet, I felt a part of a/the community for the first time.

In performance, McNally's *Corpus Christi* also touched me on a religious level. Though raised a Christian, I spent my college years questioning my faith, mostly because I found the church's intolerance of a wide variety of people and practices to be itself intolerable. While in Edinburgh, I occasionally ventured to St. Giles Cathedral on the Royal Mile on Sunday mornings, but I was dismayed to find more glamour in the Gothic architecture than God. I felt as I had felt for years at church – an outsider, unable to

reconcile my own desires and identity issues with what I understood of church doctrine. This too was a/the community to which I desperately wanted to belong. Shortly before betraying Joshua, McNally's Judas asked if Joshua was to be put to death because he says that he is the son of God. The High Priest responded, "No, because He says you're the son of God as well" (65). McNally's doctrine suggested that like Joshua, we're all God's children, even Matthew Shepard. That McNally's Joshua blesses gay marriages, opens his arms to HIV-positive strippers, and climbs up on the cross for everyone – really everyone – helped to put my wavering faith back on track. The play ended with the disciples becoming their real-life actor-ly selves again, attesting, "He loved every one of us. That's all He was about" (81). This was ministry that I could be called to, and in the church that the play was performed in, I felt that I had both joined and rejoined the flock – I was welcome into a/the community again.

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Much later I read that a previous, unpublished draft of McNally's script concluded with the line, "If we have offended you, so be it. He belongs to us as well as you." There was something forceful, aggressive, and confrontational about this written line. It spoke directly to the critiques of the play and of gays and lesbians trying to find their own entry into Christianity. I think it's a shame it was removed for the tamer published ending, "If we have offended, so be it. [. . .] Peace be with you. Good-bye. Thank you." The unpublished ending seemed more willing to take a stand, and would have been wholly appropriate if directed at the protesters surrounding the Manhattan Theatre Club or the Bedlam Theatre. Since coming out, I have found much more resonance in this unpublished version – I know that I am now firmly in the "us" group

that McNally meant, ready to claim equal and deserved ownership to Christianity. I can't actually recollect what dialogue concluded the Bedlam Theatre's *Corpus Christi*. All I can remember is the image of Mel Raido, the actor playing Joshua, left onstage on the cross.

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Throughout the production of *Corpus Christi* at the Bedlam Theatre, Joshua continually heard sawing and pounding noises – the sound of his own cross being built. As the play marched relentlessly toward its inevitable conclusion, Joshua was betrayed, taunted, whipped, and crucified, all in plain view of the audience. Two benches were lashed together and thick ropes were used to bind Joshua to this make-shift cross, which was then hoisted upright not more than ten feet from the audience. The stage directions in the published version of the play explain: “*The cross is raised. For the first time we see how horribly Joshua has been battered. Blood runs down His face and body. His eyes are half-swollen shut. It should be hard to look at Him*” (79). Sitting in the front row of the theatre at Bedlam, I gasped at this violent moment, especially as it simultaneously represented Christ's death from nearly 2,000 years ago and Matthew Shepard's senseless death from October of the previous year. I cried and become momentarily inconsolable after seeing Joshua crucified for the first time. A few days later, during my second visitation of Joshua upon the cross, I was able to focus on the play's celebration of life. In seeing this physical performance of a horrible (and yet familiar) moment of violence, Edinburgh became both Golgotha and the outskirts of Laramie, and Christ's teachings and Matthew's pain meaningfully assaulted, collided,

and settled on my body. During my first viewing of the play I mourned Matthew Shepard; during my second viewing of the play, I laid him to rest.

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A year and a half later, on December 20th, 2000, I came out to the family. My mother immediately (and in multiple conversations, since then) informed me she worries I'll go the way of Matthew Shepard, especially living in Texas. Texas suddenly seemed a little less safe to me, and a little less like the home I'd left in Portland, or the home I'd built in Edinburgh.

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In 2002, I read, then saw *The Laramie Project*, a play written by Moisés Kaufman and The Tectonic Theater Company. Devised out of hundreds of interviews with the residents of Laramie, the play purports to tell the town's version of Matthew's story, especially in the wake of the media circus that zoomed into Wyoming only to characterize Laramie and its residents as backwater, homophobic, and ugly. Although eight different actors portrayed more than sixty roles, no one played the role of Matthew, and his desires and dreams were only spoken through the surviving residents of Laramie. For me, Matthew was notably absent from the script, a fact made painfully clear upon attending an Austin production of the play at the Zachary Scott Theatre. The performers were more than competent, and the design was beautiful; rain fell from the heavens, actors changed roles seamlessly, and a huge version of the fence that Matthew was tied to loomed over and stubbornly haunted the entire production. Critics and audiences were moved, yet for some reason, I was not. Perhaps because of my experiences with *Corpus Christi*, a play very much about presence, the Laramie that I wanted to visit was one that

Matthew inhabited, yet I didn't sense his presence anywhere in the play or in the theatre.³⁵

Toward the end of the production, actors with lit candles encouraged audience members to find candles under their own seats, which they could in turn light, filling the darkened theatre space with hundreds of flickering flames. I sensed this choice was designed not only to replicate the sparkling lights of Laramie and the clear and beautiful Wyoming night sky that were the last things that Matthew saw before he died, but also to conjure a sense of ownership and participation in the play within the audience. As the actors on stage portrayed the residents of Laramie as they reflected on and mourned Matthew's death, Austin audiences seemed to be expected to come together as a community in a parallel act of mourning (or performing mourning) for Matthew, promising that they would keep Austin free from similar acts of hate and intolerance. Curiously, I wanted none of it. I found myself unmoved by the play, and angry at this production's choice to feature so prominently a moment of near-forced mourning. For both actors and audiences, it seemed too easy and too hollow a gesture. And while I recognized the production's desire to allow people to mourn Matthew (undoubtedly, this was meaningful and possibly life-changing for some audience members³⁶), I felt alienated

³⁵ Shepard's absence is intended in the play's script, of course. The goal of *The Laramie Project* is to dramatize the aftermath of his death – to portray a Matthew-less Laramie and America. I agree with Jill Dolan's assessment of the play in *Utopia in Performance*: "The play absents Shepard from its structural heart, if not its emotional one—the play's singular focus on what happened to everyone else, before and after his beating and murder, peculiarly displaces what happened to him" (114).

³⁶ Dolan, for example, writes, "I was moved in spite of myself by this moment, even as I understood that the performance manipulated my feelings. I found myself surprisingly willing to be part of this witnessing, part of this ritual honoring of loss, of grief, of wrenching, unexpected change that I can only hope will lead to some sort of deliverance" (*Utopia* 131). Though intellectually, I recognized these possibilities and goals of the production, they failed to affect me viscerally, or to move me to my feet as they did for so many others in the audience.

from the production because of what I perceived as Matthew's absence from it, as well as the simple fact that with *Corpus Christi*, I had already sufficiently mourned his death. Since I had already substituted and displaced Joshua's death on the cross for Matthew's death lashed to a fence, I had no need to witness a performance of mourning where neither Joshua or Matthew were present. Furthermore, I felt *The Laramie Project* labeled gays and lesbians as vulnerable, perpetual victims in America, in a way that *Corpus Christi* did not. Since the script and Zach Scott's production of *The Laramie Project* labored to posit Laramie as Anywhere, U.S.A., it suggested that all of us could be Matthew. Fear was once again inscribed on my body, and the act of lighting a candle wasn't nearly enough to comfort me.

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Over the next few years, three discrete acts of gay bashing rocked my world. In the largely gay-populated warehouse district of Austin on October 30, 2003, off-duty police officer Dewayne Friar was torn from a car bearing a rainbow sticker and beaten unconscious by eight men. During the summer of 2004, I lived in Seattle and read about how twenty-eight year-old Adam Conley, a member of the Seattle Men's Chorus, was punched, kicked, and cut by half a dozen men outside a gay club while on tour in Montreal. In late-October of 2004, I stayed for a week in London and learned at every tube stop and newsstand about the murder of gay pub employee David Morley. Though these weren't the only victims of prejudice and anti-gay violence since Matthew by a long shot, I happened to be in the vicinity of all of these events, which quickly became marked onto my body. Anti-gay violence seemed to be everywhere I went. I was moved, scared, and perhaps for the first time in my life, truly enraged. As I walked along

4th Street in Austin, as I read the queer-friendly weekly *The Stranger* in Seattle, and as I drank a Guinness in remembrance of Morley at his old workplace in the Cheswick neighborhood of London, I was repeatedly reminded of both *Corpus Christi* and Matthew Shepard. That I was in the proximity and “present” for each of these gay-bashings didn’t make them any less affecting, but allowed me to feel more a part of a community of mourning for these martyrs afterwards – one that I wasn’t manipulated into joining. And because I was able to witness the traces of these events both in the moment and the proximity of each of these violent acts, I felt hope that my teaching, my scholarship, my performance, and my own body might one day be a part of a solution. I found myself usefully implicated by my identity as well as my immediate locality. I was there. And I’m still here to remember and to tell these stories.

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The Laramie Project, the cities that I have lived in, and even my mother have all reminded me that I could become Matthew.³⁷ Mercifully, *Corpus Christi* reminded me that I don’t have to be Joshua: perfect, all-forgiving, or without anger. I don’t plan on forgetting either play’s lesson anytime soon. I found hope and home, comfort and community, and perhaps even God in *Corpus Christi*, as well as the series of events surrounding and informing my reception of it. Towards the end of McNally’s play, the actors implored the audience to “Look what they did to Him” (80-81). I now revisit these plays and these martyr-making acts of violence with the express purpose of witnessing

³⁷ Jill Dolan, in her *Utopia in Performance* analysis of the Zach Scott production of *The Laramie Project*, reaches a similar conclusion: “I nonetheless appreciated this communal gesture, this chance to lend my body, my candle-holding hand and my heart, to honor Matthew Shepard’s life and to embody my own sorrow at his death, my own knowledge that in other places and at other times, his fate could have been mine or one of the people I love” (134).

and remembering these lives. As I live and breathe in Edinburgh, in Seattle, in Portland, and in Austin, I'm ready now to look, to see, to mourn, and to make change. I don't want to "miss" another Matthew Shepard, just as I hope that anything remotely resembling his senseless death will never happen again.

†

Defining Martyrdom

In my last section, like many journalists, playwrights, and scholars, I've repeatedly and variously attributed the title of "martyr" to people and characters without pausing to define the term. Though some who write about Milk and Shepard as martyrs may fail to parse the word's meaning because of laziness or because of the constraints of their respective mediums, others neglect to spell it out because such scrutiny or rigor might weaken a given claim to martyrdom, or demonstrate the inappropriateness of the expression altogether. There is almost always an implied sense of scale that goes along with the term, a grandeur that comes from a willingness to risk violence and even death for a cause or belief. To subject martyrdom to such linguistic analysis could be read as a petty attempt to reduce the significance of an individual's dedication, commitment, or sacrifice.

Most dictionaries cite multiple definitions of "martyr"; to require those who invoke the term to be specific as to its concise meaning prevents the easy transfer of all of martyrdom's significations, and perhaps lessens its rhetorical power. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED) Online*, one definition primarily relates to the Christian church: "A person who chooses to suffer death rather than renounce faith in Christ or obedience to his teachings, a Christian way of life, or adherence to a law or tenet of the

Church.” Those who guard the term carefully – for example, those who object to using it in the same sentence as Harvey Milk or Matthew Shepard’s names – would point out that martyrdom is all about unwavering adherence to Christian doctrine and the persecution that results. Jesus Christ, of course, is the ultimate Christian martyr; any subsequent elevation of an individual to martyr status invites comparison to Christ, a thought that causes many people great unease. One need only revisit the controversy that McNally’s *Corpus Christi* prompted to understand how fiercely martyrdom is policed.

The definition of “martyr” that most fits the likes of Harvey Milk and Matthew Shepard is the one that applies to non-religious contexts: “A person who undergoes death or great suffering for a faith, belief, or cause” (*OED Online*).³⁸ Both men, many have argued, were killed because of their sexuality, if not their belief in the right to live out their identities openly. Harvey Milk’s outspokenness for the gay and lesbian movement angered his killer, fellow City Supervisor Dan White, on many occasions. Matthew Shepard’s death interrupted his formal activist career almost before it had begun; many friends and family members described his nascent desire to major in political science and to help people. Yet deciding to live visibly as an out gay man was a cause he believed in, a choice that many felt was enough to attribute martyr status to him immediately after his death. Again, though, many who describe these men as martyrs resist separating this secular application of the term from the explicitly religious or Christian context, perhaps because these deaths take on greater significance, carry more rhetorical force, or move

³⁸ The *OED Online* also documents a third, “rare” use of the term: “A person who bears witness for a belief, esp. the Christian faith.” Perhaps this definition has fallen out of vogue because it doesn’t include requirements of suffering or death, and might be seen to lessen the specialness of “martyr.” Still, in that Milk and Shepard chose to live as openly gay men, and because they often shared with others their beliefs and politics about the gay and lesbian movement, they might be judged martyrs by this definition as well.

more people to sympathy and action when equated with the death of Jesus Christ or other (willing) Christian martyrs.

Neither of these two definitions suggests any sort of judgment whereby one is granted martyrdom. Many definitions of sainthood, especially in the strict Christian sense, articulate requirements for canonization and a process of recognition. One might argue that martyrdom, as opposed to sainthood, is in the eye of the beholder, and less constrained by formal religious law. In “The Ambivalent Legacy of Violence and Victimhood: Using Early Christian Martyrs to Think With,” Elizabeth A. Castelli writes that “the designation ‘martyr’ is not an ontological category but a post-interpretive one, that martyrs are produced by the stories told about them” (1). Castelli suggests that martyrdom isn’t something one achieves through one’s own actions, but rather, something that is conferred through analysis and repetition by other parties; one is only a martyr when someone else declares them as such. Certainly, this aspect of the martyr-making process is unnerving for some. Castelli writes that as a scholar and author who writes and speaks about martyrdom, she has frequently been approached by people wanting her to discredit suicide bombers, to say that they are “not *really* martyrs” (1). This kind of analysis would introduce a value component or criteria into the definition of martyrdom – that people can only be considered martyrs if their beliefs, causes, and faith are in alignment with our own – as well as protect martyrdom’s Christian valence. The remainder of her article explores the ambivalent nature of martyrdom: the uncomfortable fact that others are free to attribute martyr status (and to invoke images of early-Christian martyrs in particular) to those whose politics and actions we might disagree with.

Such ambivalence is precisely what makes the religious right, some heterosexuals, and even a few gays and lesbians nervous about the martyr-making project concerning Harvey Milk and Matthew Shepard. Beyond just the juxtaposition with Christ that is part and parcel of martyrdom, the use of this rhetorical and representational trope tends to close down contrary viewpoints. Castelli writes:

The martyr story thereby becomes an authoritative ground for political argument, and because of the excess and absoluteness of the story itself (“paying the ultimate price,” “giving one’s very life for the cause”) it makes a powerful and irresistible claim upon its hearers, edging out competing stories and alternative arguments. Indeed, the symbolic power of the martyr often exceeds argument itself and can thereby short circuit disputation and debate. (2)

Here, Castelli explains that granting martyrdom is an affective strategy that is difficult to dispute, which likely explains why gay and lesbian journalists, scholars, and historians have been quick to employ (and exploit) the term. Claims of martyrdom, I argue, have a productive, if not problematic viral effect: they overshadow diverse interpretations and replace them with a singular evaluation as they circulate. In the section that follows, my goal isn’t to object to historiographies of Milk and Shepard that render them as martyrs, but rather, to chart the prevalence of such anti-dialectical turns.

I understand that such a search might seem like a *fait accompli*: once we begin to examine a subject through the relatively wide lens of martyrdom, we see strong evidence for the subject’s martyr status everywhere. I demonstrate that beyond just iterating that these individuals died because of their homosexuality or for their beliefs, many of Milk

and Shepard's chroniclers implicitly and explicitly bolster their cases for martyrdom by describing these men's Christ-like qualities. Furthermore, these same writers, whether intentionally or not, often slide into patterns of using religious discourse and vocabulary to describe their secular subjects. In "The Matthew Shepard Icon," Richard Goldstein remarks that such choices aren't necessarily outlandish or suspect:

What if the icon of Jesus actually fits the taking of Matthew Shepard's life? After all, the power of an icon is its ability to distill the essential from the welter of particularities. That's why the story of Jesus has such enormous resonance, even for nonbelievers willing to feel it, and it's why the Matthew Shepard story has the power to alter consciousness. Both embody a truth all the more elemental because it keeps repeating itself in human history.

Those who make claims for Harvey Milk and Matthew Shepard's martyrdom walk a fine line between "essential" and essentialist depending on their ultimate aims, whether the goal is to memorialize these lives lost, to offer a methodology for which they might remain in the public's consciousness, or to accomplish the passage of anti-hate crime legislation. I suggest that all of these rhetorical trends that essay to "alter consciousness" eventually surface in the dialogue and structure of artistic representations of Milk and Shepard's lives. Specifically, when their violent deaths are portrayed, these dramatizations are generally in service of emphasizing their characterization as martyrs.

Harvey Milk and Matthew Shepard

Though Matthew Shepard's death is a fresher wound in American history, two decades of scholarship and live and recorded performances have eased the trauma of Harvey Milk's murder and kept his memory and political legacy alive. Since Milk's assassination on November 27, 1978, his name has appeared everywhere. A library, a plaza, and an institute in San Francisco took on his name, as did a public high school for gay and lesbian students in New York City, a nightclub in the United Kingdom, and a heavy metal band from Athens, Georgia. In addition to the works that I address later in this chapter – Pruitt and Hutchison's musical *The Harvey Milk Show* and Wallace and Korie's opera *Harvey Milk* – Milk also was the subject of a 1984 Academy Award-winning documentary film narrated by Harvey Fierstein called *The Times of Harvey Milk*. Emily Mann's 1983 docudrama play *Execution of Justice* about Dan White's trial arrived on Broadway in 1986 and continues to be performed around the country. And over the years, various Hollywood directors like Oliver Stone and Gus Van Sant expressed interest in making a film adaptation of Randy Shilts's 1982 biography of Harvey Milk, *The Mayor of Castro Street*. The film is currently in production and set to be released in 2008, with *X-Men* director Bryan Singer at its helm. In *Staging Gay Lives*, John Clum writes, "As the riots around the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village in 1969 have become our Boston Tea Party, so Harvey Milk has become our Martin Luther King, our hero-martyr" (1). Clum's description captures the magnitude of Milk's importance in the history of the gay and lesbian movement in America, and in terming him a "hero-martyr," suggests why Milk's story remains attractive to audiences even twenty years later.

The first extensive work about Harvey Milk, Randy Shilts's biography *The Mayor of Castro Street*, continues to be the most substantive. According to Shilts, it is "a piece of journalism that employs standard, professional reportorial techniques in the gathering and verifying of all the information cited" (xiii). His narrative comprises recreations of scenes, conversations, and political speeches that illustrate or approximate the sweep of Milk's life, and especially, his political career. It briefly recounts Milk's childhood on Long Island, his years as a closeted stockbroker on Wall Street, and his move to San Francisco at the end of the 1960s to begin a new life as an openly gay man. Shilts describes in great detail Milk's two failed attempts to run for city supervisor and his loss in a California State Assembly race; only after San Francisco switched to district elections in 1977 was Milk finally elected to the City Board of Supervisors. Less than a year later, he was killed (along with Mayor George Moscone) by Dan White. White was one of Milk's conservative colleagues on the Board of Supervisors who had quit for both personal and political reasons, and who then became (even more) despondent and angry when liberals like Milk encouraged the Mayor not to reappoint him. Though conventional biographies would likely end with Milk's death, *The Mayor of Castro Street* continues on to describe White's trial that ended with the verdict with the lightest sentence available (voluntary manslaughter because of diminished capacity), as well as the subsequent White Night riots at City Hall and in the Castro district where gays and lesbians fought with the police.

In addition to compelling prose and competent storytelling, Shilts's book is an important contribution to history because it sheds light on the gay and lesbian movement in the United States, both through thick description of contemporary events and by way

of metaphor. Shilts writes in his prologue: “History offers few people whose lives neatly parallel the social causes they come to represent, but from this turbulent era came such a man, Harvey Milk. The story of Harvey Milk is, to a large extent, the story of the gay movement in San Francisco, and, ultimately, the nation” (xiii). As Shilts relates it, Milk’s experience is as a “gay everyman” (18) pursuing the American Dream; he remains steadfast despite numerous personal and political losses and finally perseveres, becoming one of the first openly gay elected officials in the country. Like many gays and lesbians, his story involved difficulties with his family, struggles with decisions to come out or remain in the closet, and encounters with violence. And like the gay and lesbian movement, his story is one of gradual acceptance outside of the queer community, as well as moments of victory and great joy, despite numerous hardships, missteps, and losses. Though hardly necessary, Shilts clarifies that Milk’s story doesn’t end with his assassination: “For years after Harvey’s death, when dull moments fell over a gay demonstration and the old slogans felt thin, someone could shout, ‘Harvey Milk lives,’ and it would not be hollow rhetoric; Harvey Milk did live, as a metaphor for the homosexual experience in America” (348). Though far less recognizable than Martin Luther King’s name, Shilts concludes that Milk’s name has not (and almost certainly will not) vanish from the history books or the public consciousness anytime soon.

It isn’t until his conclusion that Shilts unequivocally affixes Harvey Milk with the title of martyr, yet the entirety of the book, I believe, is structured to build towards precisely that point. Having conducted many interviews himself, and after becoming an expert on the sizable archive of Milk’s political career, Shilts inserts other people’s assessments that Milk is a martyr or is martyr-like throughout the book. For example,

one of Milk's lovers describes that he was "trying to be some gay messiah" (73), an early gay rights lawyer claims that "Harvey was born to be a martyr" (179), and gay politician Harry Britt, Milk's successor, suggests that he "was to us what Dr. King was to his people. Harvey was a prophet. [. . .] Knowing Harvey Milk was a blessing" (281-282). Shilts couples such characterizations with accounts of Milk registering people to vote and spreading his own gospel of gay liberation throughout the Castro district, and later, to City Hall and beyond. Shilts includes Milk's "Hope Speech" in the book's appendices, "the quintessential stump speech Milk used as he traveled around both California and the nation as the country's first openly gay city official" (359). In it, Milk preached a politics of visibility, a need to have open dialogue about homosexuality, and the imperative to elect more gays and lesbians to office around the country. Shilts also frequently returns to Milk's call for gays and lesbians to come out to their relatives, friends, and co-workers – to bear witness and gain acceptance and understanding – so that in turn, others who are still not out yet might find hope that they can too. Milk's messages could easily be likened to the good word waiting to be spread by his disciples.

One further theme that Shilts returns to throughout *The Mayor of Castro Street* is Milk's presentiments of his own death. Milk had a propensity to share his premonitions almost casually with his lovers, his friends, and his coworkers, saying things like: "I've known it since I was a kid. [. . .] I'll never make it to fifty. There's just something sinister down the road" (35) and "I'll never live to be a senior citizen" (205). Though many regarded Milk's sense of humor as among his best qualities, they were often shocked at Milk's jokes and beliefs that he would one day be killed. This Christ-like foreknowledge about his own death give Milk a sense of urgency: he would only be alive

a short time and therefore had to accomplish as much as he could as quickly as possible. Milk's out-and-proud politics, along with his desire to effect change in a hurry, put him publicly at odds with many heterosexuals as well as many of the older, more-established San Francisco gays who favored slower, quieter forms of activism. Milk even prepared for his own murder by creating multiple versions of a political will recorded on cassette tapes, instructions to his followers so that his death itself might accomplish something. In addition to suggestions to the Mayor for who should succeed him in office, he also had a message for all gays and lesbians: "If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet destroy every closet door" (372). By frequently returning to this theme, Shilts asserts a further reason why Harvey Milk should be considered a martyr: Milk believed he would one day be killed for his beliefs and actions, and yet he did nothing to lessen the possibility of such a fate, instead remaining incredibly visible and working tirelessly on behalf of others.

A brief essay on *PlanetOut.com*, a media site dedicated to reporting news for the GLBT community, smartly commemorated the twenty-fifth anniversary of Milk's death: "Harvey Milk has been called a hero, a martyr, a saint and an icon. He may be all of those things – but sometimes the actual accomplishments of this ordinary man who ended up living an extraordinary life get lost" ("Harvey Milk: Myth, Martyr, and Man"). Martyrdom tropes, as the article indicates, tend to conceal individuals' more worldly, pedestrian, or even mundane achievements. Perhaps because of his book's length, Shilts is able to illustrate a great number of these deeds, such as how Milk served his country in the Navy, forged alliances with other disenfranchised political groups like San Francisco's Chinese population, and lived a happy, authentic life as a gay man in an era

where doing so was both discouraged and dangerous. During his short time in office, he passed two laws: a bill preventing the firing of employees because of homosexuality, and a “pooper scooper” ordinance that sought to keep the city clean by requiring dog owners to clean up after their pets. He was also a key figure in the successful fight against the Briggs initiative, which would have prevented homosexuals from working as teachers in the state of California. Such details usefully ground claims of Milk’s martyrdom, a feat that shorter written works about Milk or theatrical representations don’t always manage to do.

Almost exactly twenty years after Milk’s assassination, the murder of twenty-two year-old University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepard attracted immediate and unprecedented national and international attention. Shepard’s death garnered tremendous public sympathy for gays and lesbians, and, some would argue, reawakened a sense of urgency for queer activists and citizens in America and around the world. Alisa Solomon reported that in New York City, skirmishes between mourners and riot police would prompt some to claim “[t]here’s been nothing like this since Stonewall!” (“Back to the Streets”). The scale of reaction to Shepard’s death stemmed in part from the intensely brutal nature of his killing – his attackers beat him, pistol-whipped him, and left him tied to a fence, where he remained overnight and for much of the next day – but also from the way that many in the media quickly branded him a martyr. Headlines like “The Final Days and Nights of a Gay Martyr” and “The Crucifixion of Matthew Shepard” lifted this young gay man to symbolic status even before the public learned who he was. Michael Bronski, in “A Troubling Vision of Matthew Shepard,” evaluates this journalistic trend: “And indeed, the power of his story rests not only on the fact that he was murdered solely

because he was gay, but also on the notion that he was a completely ‘innocent victim’ – young, slight, unworldly, naïve. Shepard was the perfect victim as well as the perfect martyr.” Though many have since pointed out that Shepard’s qualities for “perfect martyr” included being male, upper-middle-class, attractive, and Caucasian, such criticism did little to slow the media frenzy, to prevent public displays of grieving from queer celebrities like Elton John and Ellen DeGeneres, or to discourage the creation of a play and multiple made-for-TV-movies about his story.

Many of the journalists who described him as a martyr did so chiefly on the basis of his violent death that so resembled a crucifixion. This focus may be because Shepard was so young when he died that it was difficult to celebrate his “life’s work,” especially compared to Harvey Milk, who was already a public figure by the time he was assassinated. Yet the analogy to Jesus Christ’s death is appropriate in many respects – Shepard was beaten, taunted, strapped to a piece of wood, and left bleeding and alone to face the elements. Howard Chua-Eoan reported in *Time* that Shepard was “hung spread-eagled on a rough-hewn deer fence” and that the two bicyclists who found him thought he was a scarecrow. Chua-Eoan, like many other writers, slides into an almost religious register in his analysis: “The victim too has been transformed. [. . .] As he lay near death, Matthew Shepard, through no choice of his own, had found martyrdom.” That fence, it seems, is where Shepard was transmuted from man to symbol. As the months passed, reporters continued to describe the site of the crime as both sublime and sacred. In an article for *The Nation*, Donna Minkowitz writes, “I think it’s significant that they killed Shepard in such a beautiful place. Many people have noticed something strangely religious about this crime, and the attack looks more and more so the more you walk

around the site.” In “The Crucifixion of Matthew Shepard” in *Vanity Fair*, Melanie Thernstrom reports that “the fence has become a place of pilgrimage. Barren and beautiful [. . .], the site conjures thoughts of Golgotha” (104). Whether this fetishization of the fence and canonization of Shepard were done to make a political point (as McNally does in his preface to *Corpus Christi*) or merely because they were good copy, such press situated Shepard indelibly as the gay and lesbian movement’s most visible martyr.

In *The Whole World Was Watching*, Romaine Patterson, one of Shepard’s best friends, speaks out against such images of Matthew on the cross: “He was not strung up like a scarecrow or Jesus Christ. He’d been kneeling—or sitting—when Henderson and McKinney tied his hands behind his back to the bottom of one of the fence posts” (176). Patterson goes on to explain her distaste for politicians and journalists who seemed to have a “warped need for him to have been flawless—as if that made his death more tragic” (176). In *Losing Matt Shepard: Life and Politics in the Aftermath of Anti-Gay Murder*, University of Wyoming professor Beth Loffreda is also quick to debunk the idea that Matt was crucified (4-5). Stinging from sensational and biased reporting by journalists who only briefly invaded Laramie, both Patterson and Loffreda attempt to give more accurate context for Shepard’s life and deeper analysis of the ramifications of his death.

Yet Loffreda, Patterson, and other residents of Laramie tend to eschew calling Shepard a martyr explicitly, they repeatedly tell their stories using biblical terminology and Christian sentiments. Loffreda writes that Shepard “underwent a strange, American transubstantiation” (x), and that “his image was resurrected” (19); she also describes both tourists and activists’ journeys to the fence that resembled religious pilgrimages (130-

131). Romaine Patterson became famous as the woman who planned and carried out the peaceful “Angel Action” protests against the hate speech of Fred Phelps at Shepard’s funeral and Henderson and McKinney’s trials. While she doesn’t use the same language that Loffreda does, her writing and her relationship to Shepard invite allegorical readings. Before confronting Phelps, she actually prays to Shepard: “Matthew, be with us today to continue your light, to continue your path. [. . .] I can’t thank you enough for the gifts you have given me” (206). Since Shepard’s death, she has operated as a disciple of sorts, preaching messages to diverse audiences about love, hope, acceptance, and activism. Though ostensibly her own life story, her book reads almost as a “Gospel of Matthew according to Romaine.” She closes by writing:

And so I began to tell this story, holding close to my heart the most important lesson I picked up along the way. It was taught me by a friend, a close friend who fate decided would pay a horrible price so the whole world would know how true the lesson is: One person can make a difference. Do your part. Use your voice. Make the world a better place.
(286)

Both Patterson and Loffreda talk repeatedly about people (themselves included) in Laramie and around the country growing more accepting of diversity or otherwise making personal journeys because of what happened to Shepard.³⁹ When read alongside details of his death, such anecdotes about changes in individuals’ perceptions and overall

³⁹ Matthew’s mother Judy Shepard, for instance, founded and continues to be the executive director of the Matthew Shepard Foundation. She now travels the country to “share Matthew’s dream of replacing the hate in the world with understanding, compassion, and acceptance” (www.matthewshepard.org).

progress within the gay and lesbian movement since October of 1998 only make readings of Shepard's martyrdom more readily available.

On November 4, 1999, Dennis Shepard, Matthew's father, delivered a moving speech at the close of Aaron McKinney's trial that gave further weight to perceptions of Matthew as a martyr. After the jury found McKinney guilty of felony murder, a verdict which could have led to the death sentence, his lawyers reportedly asked Matthew's parents to intervene. Dennis Shepard took the opportunity to describe to the court how Matthew was his hero, someone he "bowed down to." He depicted Matthew as someone who wanted to help others, a peace-maker, always hopeful and perpetually forgiving.⁴⁰ At the end of the speech, Dennis Shepard explained that though his entire family believed in the death penalty, "this is the time to begin the healing process." He concluded by addressing McKinney directly: "May you have a long life, and may you thank Matthew every day for it." In doing so, Dennis Shepard extended his son's legacy; by granting mercy, he demonstrated to the world his belief that Matthew's grace and forgiveness are worthy of emulation. Shepard spoke specifically about how his son had been represented in the media over the previous eleven months: "Matt became a symbol – some say a martyr, putting a boy-next-door face on hate crimes. That's fine with me. Matt would be thrilled if his death would help others." Ultimately, the rhetoric behind his sermon is clear: Christ-like Matthew died, and as a result, others – Aaron McKinney, as well as potential hate crime victims everywhere – might live.

⁴⁰ For example, Melanie Thernstrom reports how Doc O'Connor, another friend of Shepard, described Matthew's philosophy of forgiveness: "Doc asked, 'What did you do to the people who beat the shit out of you?' He said, 'I forgave them and went on with my life'" (Thernstrom 100).

Like Richard Goldstein, I believe that when done purposefully (and not just sensationally), “[m]aking a connection between Jesus’ torment and Matthew’s turns the theological justification for homophobia on its head.” But despite its political efficacy, such a rhetorical strategy fills discussions that might otherwise be spent remembering Shepard’s earthly accomplishments. For instance, he made the choice to come out to his family and worked to keep his relationships with them strong. Furthermore, he survived a gang beating and rape while he was traveling abroad in Morocco, a feat that his friends and family point to as evidence of his strength. Many of his friends and family members point towards his desire to help others through politics; shortly before his killing he joined the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Association at the University of Wyoming, and was also appointed as the student representative to the Wyoming Environmental Council. Different retellings of his story manifest a tension between portraying Shepard the martyr versus Shepard the really nice kid who lived an authentic, unassuming life, and did a few remarkable things. Martyrdom is often used to flesh out Shepard’s story, but such a trope sometimes robs him of the agency that he had in life and ends up discounting the ways that his achievements might speak for themselves.

Clearly, Harvey Milk and Matthew Shepard had much in common apart from their tragic deaths. Both desired to make a difference, and to various degrees, both did so by leading public lives as openly gay men. Both lived – and understood that they lived – in violent times: Milk received death threats and watched as anti-gay violence increased in San Francisco during the mid-1970s; Shepard was beaten and raped while abroad, and also beaten up in multiple bars in Wyoming and Colorado. Both Milk and Shepard had premonitions about their own deaths. And after they died, many tried to taint or discredit

their legacies. To be sure, neither was a perfect fit for martyrdom. Milk was hypersexual, and had a string of lovers who were ten to twenty years younger than himself. Shepard was HIV+ and chronically depressed, and as a consequence of which he occasionally abused alcohol and crystal methamphetamine. Both were sometimes described as disagreeable: Milk as pushy, egotistic, and ambitious, Shepard as spoiled, arrogant, and pompous. All of these significant overlaps and intersections speak less to how these two were destined for martyrdom and more to how they lived normal, difficult lives common to many gays and lesbians. Some weeks after Shepard's funeral, the Gay and Lesbian Rabbinic Network (GLRN, a group of over thirty gay and lesbian Rabbis across the United States) submitted a public declaration of their grief, wherein they asserted that "in the hearts of Gay and Lesbian Americans, Matthew Shepard is surely a martyr of our people. His death calls to mind the too-many other, less-publicized Gay men and Lesbians murdered just because they were Gay or Lesbian: martyrs all" ("Martyrs of Our People"). Following their lead, I argue that representations of Harvey Milk and Matthew Shepard accomplish their best work when they gesture towards the lives and deaths of countless others.

The (Im)possibility of Staging Gay Martyrdom

Unmarked: The Politics of Performance, Peggy Phelan's landmark 1993 study about the vexed relationship between visibility and representation, can be used to point toward the difficulties inherent in the staging of martyrdom. She writes,

Unmarked attempts to find a theory of value for that which is not "really" there, that which cannot be surveyed within the boundaries of the putative

real. By locating a subject in what cannot be reproduced within the ideology of the visible, I am attempting to revalue a belief in subjectivity and identity which is not visibly representable. This is not the same thing as calling for greater visibility of the hitherto unseen. (1)

Taking a feminist, psychoanalytic approach, she posits that gender, race, and sexuality invariably suffer when they are represented both in politics and in art. Countering a long history of activists and artists who believe and practice otherwise, she argues that greater visibility doesn't in fact equal increased political power. Phelan expresses her skepticism about projects of representing identity (and in particular, female, non-white, or queer identities) within both a patriarchal society and a patriarchal system of looking. She writes, "Visibility is a trap [. . .]; it summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession. Yet it retains a certain political appeal" (6). Following Baudrillard, Phelan suggests that attempts to represent identity will invariably fail because what actually gets represented are society's preconceived notions of identity – what the culture wants to see – rather than the identity itself. Though Phelan would argue that staging martyrdom might be attractive or even productive politically, it can not hope to actually stage the martyr-individual, but instead, society's presumptions of what that martyr is or should be. In valuing the belief that subjectivity and identity can't be made visible, Phelan does not call for a cessation of all minority representations, nor does she forward strategies for more accurate or truthful representations. Rather, *Unmarked* signals a constant need to ask who or what is being made visible, and to whom.

In their refusal to embody Harvey Milk and Matthew Shepard's lives and deaths onstage, *Execution of Justice* and *The Laramie Project* portray martyrdom in a way that Phelan might value, or at least, object to less. Yet as I mentioned in my comparative response to both *Corpus Christi* and *The Laramie Project*, I'm unwilling to give up direct representation altogether. From Phelan, then, I borrow her cautious approach to representation as I examine embodiments of these queer identities (faiths, beliefs, or actions) that are the prerequisites for martyrdom. In particular, though I believe (and have experienced that) realistic depictions of moments of martyr-making violence can be cathartic and perhaps even move audiences to activism, I also worry that staging these deaths could reinforce stereotypes of queer vulnerability and victimhood. Furthermore, Phelan makes me reconsider the motives of both those looking and those being seen; do they consider these to be "good" images just because gay and lesbian characters and themes have been invisible for so long? Or even more sinister, are people fetishizing or even enjoying the consumption or creation of such representations of violence against queer bodies? Again, though *The Harvey Milk Show*, *Harvey Milk*, *Anatomy of a Hate Crime*, and *The Matthew Shepard Story* are all hopeful and generative in various ways, I find myself unconvinced at the utility of their choreographies of Milk and Shepard's violent deaths. In the remainder of this chapter, I demonstrate how martyrdom is emphatically staged throughout each piece, and especially in the scenes of violence, which overdetermines the ways that audiences can read Milk and Shepard's lives and legacies. I argue that these works have fallen into Phelan's "trap" of visibility; in their haste to render Milk and Shepard martyrs in death, these artworks have ended up fetishizing them. At the end of this chapter, I attempt to suggest methodologies for

(re)staging gay martyrdom that provide historiographical insight as well as provoke critical thought.

The Harvey Milk Show premiered at Actor's Express in Atlanta in 1991, and was so commercially successful that it was revived during their 1992-1993 season and again in 1996 to coincide with the city's Olympic celebrations. With book and lyrics by Dan Pruitt and music by Patrick Hutchison, this musical seeks to revive the sentiments that were expressed in Milk's "Hope" speech, foregrounding surety of a brighter future with the imperative to work for it. The musical's authors explain in an introduction to the play:

We first started writing together in the early 1980s. Ronald Reagan was in office, and some new "gay disease" was a whispered threat on the horizon of the gay community. We wrote songs to keep our spirits up. We wrote to write about our lives, to remind ourselves where we gay people have been, and to remind ourselves of the kind of courage it has always taken for us to merely survive. We wrote to remind ourselves that we shall endure. (3)

In *Harvey Milk*, Pruitt and Hutchison found their connection to the past, and through his legacy, a way to perform hope for what's to come.

The protagonist of *The Harvey Milk Show* is, ironically, not Harvey Milk, but a young gay man from East Texas named Jamey who gets caught up in the theatre of Harvey's life. Fleeing from his conservative family, Jamey ends up hustling in San Francisco where Harvey befriends him during one of his campaigns for office. At first just a friend, Milk becomes Jamey's lover. Jamey sets hustling aside to help elect

Harvey, and finds himself continuously amazed and affected by Harvey's optimism. The first act ends with Harvey at a microphone proclaiming: "Tomorrow is election day. Tomorrow the people of San Francisco have the opportunity to give the rest of this nation a great gift. That gift is hope" (37). He goes on to lead his flock in singing "We, the people, stand united / For the rights of ev'ry one; / Let the slightest not be slighted— / No one's due must go undone" (37). By the opening of the second act, Harvey has been elected, and Jamey, upbeat from Harvey's message of hope, is picking up his younger sister at the train station, eager to reestablish familial ties and show off his new life. Jamey witnesses Harvey's successes – no small miracles – of passing the "pooper scooper" ordinance and of confronting Anita Bryant, the conservative Dade County "Save the Children" spokeswoman. Still, Jamey is a realist living in oppressive times, and his own confidence falters, especially as Harvey begins receiving more and more death threats during Bryant's campaign. Jamey sings, "You always have such faith in what is yet to come— / I don't dare it— / Since you have so much faith—and I could sure use some— / Could you share it?" (44). Jamey's worst fears are realized when Dan White assassinates Harvey, and following the trial's verdict, he ships his sister back to Texas and rushes into the White Night riots, angrily shouting, "BURN IT DOWN, GODDAMMIT!" (60). Without Harvey's faith in the future, all Jamey is left with is rage.

Accompanied by Hutchison's score that features gospel music and hymns, Harvey's Christ-like tendencies are on display from his first entrance. He plays the peacemaker in neighborhood disagreements, and tends to Jamey's wounds after he is beaten up (in a bizarre musical scene that reviewer Lloyd Rose described as "some sort of

berserk Gay-Bashing Dream Ballet”). A San Francisco resident sings of the need for “a new messiah” (32), and even Harvey himself jokes “next month they’ll have me walking on water” (33). In *The Harvey Milk Show*, Harvey’s real enemy isn’t Dan White, but a shape-shifting character named Mr. Jones who slides in and out of scenes as a symbolic force of conservatism and homophobia. Mr. Jones is the one who sows discontent amongst San Francisco’s conservative residents; he orchestrates the attack on Jamey, he plays the role of Anita Bryant, and he puts the pistol in Dan White’s hand the night before the assassination. Next to such an obvious symbol of evil, Harvey Milk can’t help but be, as Rose describes him, “an earnest guy with a heart of gold, a hero for all the oppressed, a good little martyr.” As suggested in the stage directions, Harvey’s death is efficient and brutal: Dan White enters Harvey’s office and without saying anything, “*raises the gun, fires twice. HARVEY falls. WHITE moves closer and fires two more times into Milk’s head. Blackout*” (57). Diane Feinstein, the president of the Board of Supervisors, makes a brief announcement that Mayor Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk have been shot, and immediately a candlelight processional of mourners appears. Harvey’s Christ-like status is cemented when he rises again and appears to a distraught Jamey in the play’s epilogue. He foretells Dan White’s release from jail and subsequent suicide, and convinces Jamey to channel his anger into activism: “*As HARVEY exits, JAMEY’s hand reaches out towards him, then slowly upward, and forms itself into a fist. Slow fade, curtain*” (62). Harvey’s violent death prompts his disciple Jamey to keep the legacy of hope and hard work alive, just as *The Harvey Milk Show* asks its audiences to recognize, as Harvey and Jamey sing, that there is “so very, very much left undone” (62).

In Wallace and Korie's opera *Harvey Milk*, though Harvey is portrayed as a martyr, it is clear that he's no saint. Despite his heroic fighting at the Stonewall riots at the end of the opera's first act, much of his early years were spent pursuing sex. In the opera's second act, "The Castro," Harvey aggressively campaigns, advocating "You're never given power. You have to take it" (28). As he does so, he makes enemies of Dan White, as well as conservative gay organizations like the Alice B. Toklas Democrats. Even his lover Scott comments that Harvey is "a street fighter without caution or tact" (34). At the close of the act, such tactlessness is made abundantly clear as Harvey upstages the new City Supervisors' inauguration ceremony with an enormous Gay Pride parade. In the opera's third and final act, "City Hall," Harvey plays politics to a dangerous degree: "*In the corridors and offices beneath the grand rotunda of City Hall, nine City Supervisors make deals: Milk; Hutch; Gonzalez; Silver; Lau; Kopp, Molinari; Pelosi; Dolson. Harvey moves nimbly from level to level, lining up allies, whispering into ears, cajoling, shaking hands, negotiating*" (45). Harvey infuriates White by pushing a Gay Rights Ordinance through, and later threatens Mayor George Moscone that he'll never be re-elected if White is allowed to be reappointed after he's quit. Despite his obvious flaws, though, he emerges as more than just a leader, but a worker of minor miracles. At the start of the second act, he enters to meet the Castro masses from a second story window by opening an umbrella and floating magically to the street. At the close of the second act, he causes his campaign manager's Harley-Davidson to descend from the heavens, upon which he leads the victory parade. Such spectacular feats call to mind Christ's walking on water, but Wallace and Korie also let Harvey accomplish more

practical miracles, like orchestrating Gay Rights legislation, as well as allow him moments of kindness, generosity, and self-sacrifice.

Without the story's inevitable violence, Wallace and Korie's protagonist might have just remained a hero or a role model for San Francisco's gays and lesbians. Yet Harvey Milk's violent death is so important to the martyr-making project of Wallace and Korie's opera that it is staged twice, once at the beginning of the piece and once towards the middle of the final act. During the play's opening moments, forty-eight year old Harvey is revealed working in his City Hall office, while on another part of the stage and from another moment in time, his mother warns a fifteen year old Harvey to be careful of "a world full of Golems" (3). Dan White enters in slow motion, and as Harvey rises from his desk in surprise, he is shot by White repeatedly. In performance at the Houston Grand Opera, the bullets are loud blanks fired onstage, accentuated by drumbeats from the orchestra pit. As all this happens, a recording of Diane Feinstein's announcement of Moscone and Milk's death plays,⁴¹ and young Harvey runs from his mother, only stopping when he sees the body. Young Harvey takes a long look at his adult self, and watches as Dan White kicks the body over and exits. Young Harvey follows him, suggesting Milk's willingness to live dangerously – that he isn't afraid of what might happen to him. The entire scene plays like an extended premonition for young Harvey, and in that he runs towards his own death and follows his own killer offstage, suggests

⁴¹ Footage of Diane Feinstein's announcement is also used at the beginning of the documentary film *The Times of Harvey Milk*. Such a device, I argue, goes beyond just the desire to document the real-life horror of the murders in the moments immediately after they happened. In each case, beginning achronologically is part of the martyr-making process, pointedly reminding audiences that Harvey Milk's life and accomplishments are all building towards a violent death based on who he was and what he stood for.

his acceptance of it. By opening the opera in this epic, stylized way, Wallace and Korie indicate that Harvey is willingly rushing towards his own violent destiny.

During the third act, Dan White is revealed in his Barcalounger eating Twinkies while Scott and Harvey are at the Opera. As Dan White loads his pistol, Harvey realizes “Someone is out there, watching. / Some frustrated, angry person” (54). He tells Scott “If a bullet should enter my brain / let it shatter every closet door” (55). In the next scene, we see Dan White shooting Mayor Moscone four times before again stalking to Harvey’s office and shooting him five times. Moscone’s death is neither slow nor stylized; loud gunshots come from the onstage pistol’s blanks. In this third act iteration of Milk’s death, there is no slow, stylized motion, but otherwise, the physical action is identical to what Young Harvey saw in his premonition. Each bullet shot to Harvey in the third act is an amplified, recorded explosion – more so than Moscone’s murder, Harvey’s is a death that shakes San Francisco to its very foundations. A recording of Harvey’s political will plays on tape: “I fully realize that a person who stands for what I stand for, an activist, a gay activist, becomes the target for a person who is insecure, terrified, afraid or very disturbed themselves. I wish I had time to explain everything I did. Almost everything that was done was done with the eyes of the gay movement” (56). Having unquestionably articulated Harvey’s martyr status – he was killed because he was gay and refused to be otherwise – Wallace and Korie allow Harvey and Young Harvey to ascend to “*a high place overlooking the mourners*” (57). As the Kaddish (the Jewish prayer of remembrance) is recited for Harvey by “*a sea of mourners*” (57) in a candlelight procession, old and young Harvey look on, watching in hope that every closet door is on its way to being shattered.

Anatomy of a Hate Crime was aired in 2001 as the linchpin of MTV's "Fight for Your Rights: Take a Stand against Discrimination" campaign. Romaine Patterson acted as the film's advisor and also appeared in a live thirty minute discussion after the film, fielding questions about the film and about Shepard from a live audience and from callers.⁴² Following the film's first screening and talkback, MTV suspended their normal programming and aired eighteen commercial-free hours of the names of hate crime victims scrolling across the television screen. The film itself opens with a brief montage of news updates, footage of prayer vigils and Fred Phelps' demonstrations, and an announcement that "the victim is twenty-one years of age, five feet two inches tall, and weighs one hundred and five pounds. His skull had been struck eighteen times with a handgun." A voiceover begins, and before long, a camera reveals Shepard standing at the fence, speaking posthumously as the film's narrator. The entire film, then, is structured through two alternating threads of flashbacks: one that backtracks months and years to investigate Shepard, Aaron McKinney, and Russell Henderson's lives; and a second featuring scenes from the evening of October 6, 1998, beginning with Shepard's entrance to the bar where he would meet Henderson and McKinney, and culminating in his murder. Despite the scenes that portray Shepard's story and his regular narration, the film largely focuses on McKinney and Henderson's troubled lives steeped in poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, and being picked on and assaulted by others. In doing so, the film seeks to dramatize Shepard's death not as an isolated event perpetrated by clear-cut villains, but instead as symptomatic of larger societal problems of hate and violence.

⁴² The film was not sanctioned by either the Shepards or the Matthew Shepard Foundation, and neither Judy nor Dennis Shepard appear as characters in the film.

The film's use of Shepard as omnipotent narrator unmistakably invokes the martyr trope. Shepard's pointed questions to the camera portray him as a teacher prompting his off-camera pupils to see the world as he does: "They called my murder a hate crime. Where does that kind of hate come from? Are we born with it? Or are there moments in our lives that create that hate? If we look hard enough, can we find those moments?" Throughout the first half of the film, Shepard organizes flashbacks for the audience that will best shed light on such moments and reveal his teachings. But once he leaves the bar with McKinney and Henderson, he ceases narrating for an extended period, and is scarcely represented. Instead, the film follows McKinney and Henderson's actions after they left Shepard on the fence – as they get into a fight with a drug dealer, as they run from the police, as they get their girlfriends to help them conceal the crime. Long scene after long scene goes by with no narration from Shepard; the audience, clearly, is meant to feel anxiety because of their separation from Shepard, a loss designed to mirror Matthew's own suffering after his abandonment on the hill above Laramie. Finally, the camera shows a biker spotting Shepard tied to the fence. Though the shot is blurry and from a distance, Shepard looks like he has been propped vertically against the fence, lashed to it or collapsed onto it as an *ad hoc* crucifix, not unlike early (erroneous) reports of Shepard's death. Right before the film's conclusion, a brief clip shows a student telling an interviewer, "He was no different than any of us, and they crucified him." As people begin to tell his story, to witness to the reporters, Shepard appears again briefly as narrator. This time, he takes a different pedagogical approach:

My whole life, I thought that if I were able to get people to think beyond their preconceptions, if I could make just one straight person understand

what it's like to be gay, then my life would be worthwhile. [. . .] Did my death accomplish what I hoped to accomplish in my life? That's up to you now. Don't forget me.

Instead of more teachable moments – more flashbacks to expose the roots of his violent death – Shepard charges the audience with evaluating his legacy.⁴³ Shepard's ultimate act of teaching is to leave his disciples to answer his questions, to interpret his wisdom, and to carry on his teachings. As Shepard turns away from the fence and walks into the unknown, the audience is given no more answers from Shepard, and must begin the difficult work of answering the charge to remember him and to get people to “think beyond their preconceptions” as a community.

The choreography of Shepard's violent death in *Anatomy of a Hate Crime* arguably reinforces his martyr status. As he sits alone at the bar, McKinney and Henderson perch on either side of him, feigning friendship and making small-talk about Shepard's clothes and hair. Shepard accepts a ride home from them, only to have McKinney punch him once in the car, claiming “We're not gay and you're getting jacked.” Their betrayal seems to distress him almost as much as being thrown out of the car and into the fence. Shepard asks them to stop, offers them money, and weeps softly. McKinney's attack grows more brutal as he hits Shepard harder and harder with the pistol. Henderson commands, “that's enough dude, let's just get out of here,” which briefly causes McKinney to turn on Henderson, striking him across the face. McKinney

⁴³ This technique mirrors Dennis Shepard's speech to the courtroom at McKinney's trial: “He wanted to continue making friends and at the same time help others. He wanted to make a difference. Did he? You tell me” (Shepard).

then straddles Shepard, who is by now slumped against the fence on the ground. McKinney raises the gun in one hand and brings it down on Shepard, then raises it in both hands and hits him again. The camera fades to black, more likely showing Shepard passing out from blunt trauma and blood loss than the actual end of the attack. Though the scene happens quickly and the attack is devastating, Shepard's vocals are relatively quiet and his attempts at resistance are negligible. In an earlier voiceover, Shepard had announced, "Why Laramie? It's not the obvious place for an openly gay man to get his life together. But I was determined to be myself in a place I could call home. And I wasn't going to hide." Shepard's martyrdom is established at the fence when he passively accepts violence as a consequence of not hiding his identity.

Dennis and Judy Shepard were advisors on the television movie *The Matthew Shepard Story*, which originally aired on NBC on March 16, 2002. The film could just as easily have been called "The Dennis and Judy Shepard Story" – Matthew appears only in flashbacks, and the majority of the film is devoted to Dennis and Judy's difficult decision whether or not to ask for the death penalty for Aaron McKinney. In her *New York Times* review, Julie Salamon accurately describes that "[t]his isn't so much Matthew Shepard's story as a parable of Matthew Shepard, using his brief life and terrible end to promote tolerance and good will." The film's structure consists of two journeys, both of which culminate at the fence. One shows Matthew's life abroad, in Denver, in Laramie, and on the night of his death; the other arc extends from Matthew's funeral to Dennis Shepard's advocacy for mercy at the close of McKinney's trial, a conclusion arrived at during and because of a pilgrimage to the site where their son was killed. The film debuted exactly one week after HBO's ninety-seven minute television distillation of *The*

Laramie Project first aired, a convergence that Richard Goldstein marks as significant in “The Matthew Shepard Icon”: “There’s no reason why these two movies should overlap; the murder occurred in October of 1998, so there’s no anniversary to observe. But it can’t be coincidental that both films are being shown in the shadow of Good Friday and Easter Sunday.” Both films, but especially *The Matthew Shepard Story* that has an actor play the role of Matthew, raised Shepard from the dead at precisely the same time that religious communities everywhere were celebrating Jesus Christ’s death, resurrection, and legacy.

Certainly, Matthew’s Christ-likeness is on display throughout the film. Salamon notes, “It’s clear that pieties will be in abundance early on, when the camera moves from a photograph of Matthew, at a memorial service, to the stained glass images of Jesus and other saintly figures.” The film portrays Matthew offering hope to a young gay man fretting over coming out to his family; Matthew communicates his faith in humanity, telling his friend, “You know, you’re going to think the whole world hates you, but you’d be surprised with who ends up standing in your corner. Trust me on that.” In one scene, just before he moves back to Laramie from Denver, Matthew leaves a gift (a glass statuette of an angel, which Romaine Patterson had given him) on the doorstep of his next door neighbor, a homophobe who had spent considerable time making Matthew’s life miserable. Yet the story also features moments of Matthew alternately angry and despairing; one scene shows Romaine letting Dennis and Judy into Matthew’s apartment, which, in a fit of depression, he hadn’t left for days. Throughout the film, the camera focuses on Judy and Dennis agonizing over their speech for the court, struggling with how to best memorialize their son. They curse his naiveté, and remember his depression

as well as his feelings of loneliness. Matthew's story, the film suggests, is all the more powerful because of how vulnerable and human he was prior to his transformation to martyr.

Matthew is important in *The Matthew Shepard Story* more for what he enables than for what he accomplishes. At the fence, just prior to the trial, his parents debate what to recommend to the jury:

Dennis: I need McKinney dead, Judy.

Judy: I know. He deserves to die. But the tribute to Matthew's life shouldn't be McKinney's death. Our son was beautiful, and when you have something beautiful, you should show it to the world. You should use it to give something, not take something away. I want to take the plea.

Dennis: I can't.

Judy's words and the memory of Matthew effect a conversion in Dennis such that by the very next scene, he is no longer calling for McKinney's death. At the trial (as in *The Laramie Project*), Dennis describes how Matthew was already on the way to making a difference in the world, and reminds the court that others are already considering Matthew a martyr, which he finds appropriate. He concludes by admonishing McKinney that he needs to thank Matthew for his life; in this emotionally and thematically charged moment, Dennis and the film make clear that Matthew died not just because of McKinney's sins, but for them. The film concludes with Christian generosity being carried out in Matthew's name.

As with Harvey Milk's death in Wallace and Korie's opera, Matthew Shepard's murder is represented at two different moments in *The Matthew Shepard Story*: at the very start of the film and then again in brief flashes during his parent's trip to the fence. The bashing during the opening is hyper-violent, magnified by jerky, slow motion camera-shots. McKinney's movements are choreographed as savage, jumping around and pistol-whipping Matthew repeatedly; his blood-lust is accompanied by a rapid drumbeat, and all of his vocals are distorted to sound animalistic. Matthew's suffering and the ferociousness of the assault at the fence are unquestionable – he is so overpowered that he is unable to put up any resistance, and no sound can be heard over McKinney's gleeful animal rage. Shortly afterwards a policewoman cradles Matthew's broken body at the fence, an obvious Pietà. This first scene precedes even the title sequence, and gives the sense that the violence that Matthew suffered was not just the initiating moment for all the grief to come, but also something that Matthew was predestined to, that he was inevitably moving towards. By prefacing the film with his murder, all of the scenes with Matthew – the various episodes of his life – are channeled for the audience through the lens of his impending death. During the flashbacks throughout the film, it becomes clear that Matthew was no stranger to violence. In one scene, Matthew and his gay friends flee a truck that tries to mow them down. In another particularly awful scene, Matthew is dumped by his boyfriend while on a class trip to Morocco, and is then immediately beaten and raped by a group of locals. The violence is again accompanied with drumbeats and animalistic sound effects, and Matthew's shoes are stolen, as they would be later by McKinney and Henderson. The film posits that the brutality of Matthew's death, which is revisited during Dennis and Judy's visit to the

fence, parallels the anguish he experienced in life. Such a revelation of a perpetually unkind world catalyzes his father's decision to grant mercy and establishes Matthew's legacy as a martyr; not only is his death Christ-like, but it encourages those who learn of it do Christian things.

As I've demonstrated throughout this section, the violence in *The Harvey Milk Show*, *Harvey Milk*, *Anatomy of a Hate Crime*, and *The Matthew Shepard Story* does little except reemphasize the martyr trope so prevalent within each work. This makes sense, of course, considering that each is structured in a unified way, such that all elements of the production cohere to highlight Milk or Shepard's martyrdom. My concern, however, is that Milk and Shepard's Christ-likeness is already so on display throughout each piece (and is so widespread in the public sphere) that the staging of their violent deaths is rendered meaningless; as such, Phelan's criticism of visibility enabling "voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession" (6) seems to apply. Phelan also writes in *Unmarked* that "[b]y seeing the blind spot within the visible real we might see a way to redesign the representational real. If the visible real is itself unable to constitute a reliable representational real its use-value must lie elsewhere" (3). I believe that the emptiness of the violence in these four works points to such a "blind spot" within our historiographic understanding of these real-life events. I would hope, as Phelan indicates, that the legacy of these imperfect works is a call to revisit conventional historiographies of those who are crowned "gay martyrs," an undertaking that would spur us to redesign how we represent them on stage and screen.

Conclusion / (re)staging Gay Martyrdom:

Although attributing gay martyrdom is an emotional and an aesthetic project, it must be remembered that it is also always a political one. Certainly, it takes a degree of bravery to call someone a martyr and to then support such an argument against those hostile to the idea. There is also an element of political expediency to queers laying claim to religious language and iconography. And the trope of martyrdom, perhaps because of its religious connotations as well as its familiarity as an archetype, gains easy access into the public sphere. In “Our Media-Made Martyrs,” Michelangelo Signorile concludes, “The lesbian and gay community would be stupid not to use media-created symbols to our advantage. If the media are going to prey upon the public’s impulses and turn Matthew Shepard into a martyr, then we might as well exploit that to focus attention on antigay violence and the need for a federal hate-crimes bill.” Certainly, Matthew Shepard’s murder galvanized many in America to rethink their views on homosexuality, and in the years following his death, an amount of political progress and social acceptance has been achieved for queer citizens. Yet the cry of “martyr” at every gay bashing runs the risk of becoming obvious and ineffective as a political rhetoric, no matter how appropriate the term. Queer scholars, journalists, politicians, and citizens at large need to use gay martyrdom as a political strategy and as a representational trope both carefully and critically.

*

Culpability – Though most representations are clear as to who ultimately commits acts of violence – we usually see who pulls the trigger, who does the tying to the fence – moments of staged violence can also gesture to the greater context and motivations for

aggression at the same time as the violence being carried out. Who teaches intolerance? Who encourages hate? Who makes the gun (or the Twinkie)? Dan White assassinated Harvey Milk, and Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson murdered Matthew Shepard, that much is clear. But there is plenty of room in the offices at San Francisco's City Hall, and there is limitless space at the fence outside of Laramie; those of us staging violence against queers shouldn't be afraid to place those who contributed to these deaths at the scene of the crime, or even choreograph them joining in. Are all those in the audience complicit for not doing more? A mirror onstage behind the performed violence can demonstrate everyone's part in creating a society where such crimes can occur.

*

Agency – If a key element to some definitions of martyrdom is “choice,” then moments of performed violence can be productively used to describe a victim's agency within the act. If Harvey Milk or Matthew Shepard could have known that their murders would have so much meaning for so many people, would they have chosen death willingly? Though neither Milk nor Shepard likely desired to die as they did, how might a representation of Milk loading White's pistol or Shepard willingly climbing up on the fence make meaning? Would such a staging strengthen their claims to martyrdom and (re)accord them some of the agency that they lost in death, or when they became complex symbols? Or might it suggest the absurd nature of the entire martyr-making process? Conversely, would drawn-out death scenes with Milk and Shepard pleading for their lives render them less worthy martyrs? In that both men had premonitions of their impending deaths, how could their decisions to live public, queer lives be performed even as the violence is being enacted upon them? Such production choices would require audiences

to revisit their conceptions of Milk and Shepard, as well as prompt them to consider whether or not they would be willing to sacrifice their own lives for their sexual, political, or religious identities.

*

Maintaining Identity – Though representations of hate crimes will almost invariably engage the martyr trope, performances of violence can also gesture back to the humanity of the individual. Beth Loffreda writes about sifting through boxes of court files that also contained ephemera from Matthew’s life – a Mother’s Day card, a privacy sign for his bedroom door, merit badges – on the same day that she first visited the fence when writing *Losing Matt Shepard* (162-164). Such markers of a life lived could already adorn the fence as Matthew dies upon it to maintain a sense of who he was. Similarly, staging a gay pride parade in the Castro concurrently with Harvey’s death, or even the enactment of someone cleaning up after their pet, could help to ground Milk’s legacy in his earthly accomplishments.

Chapter 3: Staging the Threat of Queer Violence

Shortly after my graduation from high school, my mother took me on my first trip to New York City. Despite Disney's recent "clean-up" of the Times Square neighborhood, the idea that Manhattan was a potentially dangerous place colored our visit, and our walks back to the hotel each night seemed like fearful near-sprints, full of suspicion of anyone who walked by us. My mother's strategy to discourage anyone from assailing us was for me to "puff up," a dynamic shift in how I was carrying myself and occupying public space. Her choreography involved me standing straight, removing my hands from my pockets, lifting my head high, sticking out my chest, and making conscious eye contact with those we passed by. Even as a seventeen year old, I was able to read and understand her pedagogy – by projecting the idea of strength and self-assuredness, I would discourage others from committing violence against us. The concept has remained important to my mother over the years; as I've walked foreign cities alone at night, and perhaps especially since I've come out, she has frequently called or written to remind me to "puff up" during my travels. Situated somewhere between common sense, over-reaction, and critically-engaged resistance, "puffing up" as a personal strategy, much to my mother's credit, hasn't failed me yet.

Rather than organize this chapter around a particular moment of rupture (as I did with the Stonewall riots) or a common representational trope (Harvey Milk and Matthew Shepard as martyrs), I structure my thinking in this chapter around a strategy: mobilizing the threat of queer violence as a response, or a solution, to anti-gay violence. I begin this chapter by investigating the history of queer street patrols, groups of gays and lesbians who walk queer neighborhoods together to deter, prevent, and interrupt hate crimes.

Then I briefly examine the Pink Pistols, a gay and lesbian pro-gun group that operates under the motto, “Armed Gays Don’t Get Bashed.” As a theoretical bridge between real violence and representations of violence, I look to “Imagined Violence/Queer Violence: Representations of Rage and Resistance,” an essay in which Judith Halberstam champions depictions of violence as a way to challenge the status quo. She writes,

Imagined violence [. . .] is the fantasy of unsanctioned eruptions of aggression from the wrong people, of the wrong skin, the wrong sexuality, the wrong gender. We have to be able to imagine violence, and our violence needs to be imaginable because the power of fantasy is not to represent but to destabilize the real. (263)

For Halberstam, the imagination of violence primarily means the creation and dissemination of artworks that suggest that minority subjects might wield violence against the dominant social order. Halberstam argues that these representations, such as films like Ridley Scott’s *Thelma and Louise* and Paul Verhoeven’s *Basic Instinct*, create fear for the Establishment that violence might be enacted against them. In addition to representation, Halberstam indicates that the imagination of violence can also take the form of embodied activism, like that of New York City’s Pink Panthers, a queer street patrol that uses the threat of violence to alter the social sphere. Rather than merely extending her methodology to live performance and looking at plays which feature violent queers, I turn instead to two works in which the protagonists imagine the potential of queer violence for themselves. I analyze Doric Wilson’s 1977 play *The West Street Gang* and Split Britches’ (Deb Margolin, Peggy Shaw, and Lois Weaver) 1992 play *Lesbians Who Kill*. These works do stage the threat of queer violence, but more

importantly, through characters who debate, play at, and dream about violence, these plays actually stage the critical thinking and logic behind Halberstam's article and citizen action groups that resist hate-crimes.

This loose web of connections that I explore in this chapter is not meant to suggest that invoking the threat of queer violence is the only response available to gay and lesbian activists seeking to deter hate crimes. Historians and sociologists have already written at length about the myriad innovations that queer communities have developed to protest and combat anti-gay violence and hate.⁴⁴ Organizations like New York City's Anti-Violence Project (AVP) and San Francisco's Citizens United Against Violence (CUAV), for instance, have established hot-lines for victims of gay bashings, and provided individuals with mental-health counseling, as well as help interacting with the police and the justice system. Members of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP) have channeled their anger into an incredible array of actions, demonstrations, protests, and performances that seek to counter the violence of AIDS. Many political groups have advocated self-defense classes for gays and lesbians, while others have offered training in non-violent response to violence. In addition, a gym culture has emerged among gays and lesbians since the 1970s; by gaining muscle mass and improving fitness, many individuals have sought to look and feel healthy, as well as end stereotypes of the weak or diseased homosexual. I mention all of these acts of individual

⁴⁴ See Gary David Comstock, *Violence Against Lesbians and Gay Men*; Gregory M. Herek and Kevin T. Berrill, *Hate Crimes: Confronting Violence Against Lesbians and Gay Men*; Valerie Jenness and Kendal Broad, *Hate Crimes: New Social Movements and the Politics of Violence*; Douglas Victor Janoff, *Pink Blood: Homophobic Violence in Canada*; and Phyllis B. Gerstenfeld, *Hate Crimes: Causes, Controls, and Controversies*.

and collective resistance to contextualize the strategies of queer street patrols and the Pink Pistols, groups that have received little scholarly or critical attention.

Scholars, researchers, and intellectuals have written at great length about the nature of anti-gay hate crimes. Many studies agree that antigay bias is still considered socially acceptable, and that opposition to homosexuality continues to be the norm within many religions. Furthermore, homosexuality has long been equated with illness, a phenomenon that has only been magnified since AIDS ravaged an entire generation of gay men. Both gays and lesbians are routinely persecuted because of their perceived violation of gender roles and their challenge to conventional masculinity. Historically, gays and lesbians have been frequent targets of violence because of stereotypes of helplessness as well as their known reluctance to report crimes. Such a reluctance makes sense for those who wish to remain closeted, or for those in times and places where homosexuality itself is still considered a crime.

Progress within gay and lesbian movements has, ironically, also contributed to a culture of anti-gay violence. For example, the post-Stonewall increase in gay and lesbian visibility has made targets for violence all the easier to locate, at the precise time that many gays and lesbians have let down their guards because of perceived social change. And certainly, history highlights the complex relationship between political breakthroughs of minorities and social backlash. In *Hate Crimes: Causes, Controls, and Controversies*, Phyllis B. Gestenfeld writes, “Whenever a subordinate group is perceived to be gaining influence, some members of the dominant group act to quash these advances” (163). The portrait that emerges from all of these descriptions of the logic

(and illogic) behind anti-gay violence is complex and multi-layered, suggesting the need for an array of responses and political strategies.

As I was writing the introduction to this chapter, for example, I received a mass e-mail from Joe Solmonese, president of the Human Rights Campaign, again asking for support for their push for comprehensive federal hate crime legislation. His argument was prefaced with an account of the murder of Andrew Athos, a 72-year old gay man from Detroit who was stalked and beaten to death with a metal pipe in late February 2007. My research for this chapter is populated by too many stories just like this, accounts throughout history of gays and lesbians being savagely beaten, tortured, and killed for their non-conformity. In the face of such overwhelming and vicious anti-queer sentiment and action, I write this chapter to celebrate the diversity of resistances being undertaken by groups like queer street patrols and the Pink Pistols to interrupt and end anti-gay violence. Though I'm not naïve enough to think that their work alone will emphatically end all such hate crimes, I believe that their efforts, along with those of countless other organizations and individuals, will eventually bring about some degree of tangible social change. In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Esteban Muñoz writes,

The concept of worldmaking delineates the way in which performances—both theatrical and everyday rituals—have the ability to establish alternate views of the world. These alternative vistas are more than simply views or perspectives; they are oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of 'truth' that subjugate minoritarian people. (197)

Alongside the labors of queer street patrols and the Pink Pistols, I write about world-making plays like *The West Street Gang* and *Lesbians Who Kill* precisely because they dare to imagine a different relationship between queerness and violence; in doing so, they allow their audiences to conceive the world anew. Put simply, these instances and representations of resistance to anti-gay violence give me great hope for the future. Perhaps someday there won't be any need to "puff up" or otherwise embody or employ the threat of violence.

Queer Street Patrols

As early as the mid-1970s, groups of concerned citizens noticing a rise in anti-gay and lesbian violence began to organize and patrol queer neighborhoods by foot. Their goal was to prevent or defuse conflicts, if not by actual physical force then by acting as a visual deterrent to violence – forming a uniformed pseudomilitia that would discourage potential gay-bashers. I argue that these pedestrian patrols around major metropolitan areas literally rewrote the urban space; their forceful gay and lesbian bodies worked towards replacing stereotypes of the vulnerable queer, and their presence worked to reclaim entire neighborhoods as queer-friendly. Evaluating the achievements of these ephemeral patrols isn't easy, however. Most articles about them, unsurprisingly, concentrate on their goals and proposed methodologies, but rarely describe these groups in action, attempt to empirically measure a shift in crime rates, or assess a shift in public consciousness. As each of these groups on which I focus have already ceased patrolling and begun to fade into obscurity, I apply Michel de Certeau's "Walking in the City" as a way to approximate their accomplishments, to theorize how their use of the threat of

queer violence as a response to urban homophobic violence reinscribed the city as livable and safe for some of its marginalized citizens.

Though the majority of the queer patrols that operated during the 1990s eschewed actual physical violence, two groups from the 1970s – San Francisco’s Lavender Panthers and New York City’s Society to Make America Safe for Homosexuals (SMASH) – seemed to embrace it. A short 1973 *Time* magazine article titled “The Lavender Panthers” describes the short-lived Lavender Panthers, “a stiff-wristed team of gay vigilantes,” who existed solely to stop attacks against members of the local queer community. The article begins by describing a gay bashing by San Francisco teenagers that the Lavender Panthers interrupted: “Suddenly, a brawny band, led by a man in a clerical collar, leaped from a gray Volkswagen bus and lit into them. ‘We didn’t even ask questions,’ said the Rev. Ray Broshears, 28. ‘We just took out our pool cues and started flailing ass.’” The Lavender Panthers patrolled from their car, and carried weapons like chains, billy clubs, and spray paint (a Mace substitute); all were variously trained in martial arts. Similarly, SMASH consisted of a handful of leathermen who patrolled the streets of Chelsea and the West Village by car, primarily to rescue gay men from violence already in progress. In “Early Gay Activism in Chelsea: Building a Queer Neighborhood,” Michael Shernoff describes the group’s tactic of having a lone decoy walk late at night outside of gay clubs. After the decoy attracted gay bashers, members of SMASH would jump out of their car, “punching and knocking around thugs, delivering the message if they continued to attack gays, we were ready.” Both the Lavender Panthers and SMASH used actual physical violence to stop hate crimes, a strategy that seems to have been more effective on the micro-level and in the short-term;

neither group existed long enough to be commented on by many of the historians or sociologists exploring gay and lesbian resistance to hate crimes.

In his 1991 *Gay Community News* article, “Getting Defensive; Queer Patrols Hit the Streets,” Steve Karpf cites the tremendous amount of anti-gay violence in major metropolitan areas across the United States between 1989 and 1990 – a 42 percent rise nationwide – as being almost catalytic in the formation of a new wave of queer patrols. Anti-gay backlash from the AIDS epidemic as well as an increase of gay and lesbian visibility in urban centers may have spurred much of this increased violence. New York City’s The Pink Panthers and the San Francisco Street Patrol (SFSP) were formed, both in 1990, as a branch of Queer Nation, an already established activist group committed to embodied AIDS activism. Seattle’s Queer Safety Patrol (often shortened to Q-Patrol) surfaced in 1991 as a necessary response to the almost daily gay bashings that were taking place in the Capitol Hill neighborhood. The patrols of the 1970s, the Lavender Panthers and SMASH, can perhaps best be characterized as angry and reactionary, constituted by just a few people without much in the way of long-term planning or support. The groups of the 1990s, on the other hand, had the benefit of larger support organizations, and an additional fifteen years of gay and lesbian activism to draw upon. While these 1990s patrols were undoubtedly angry about anti-gay violence, they didn’t bring their rage with them on patrol, and all of their work was much more calculated. Though the Lavender Panthers and SMASH may have served in part as the inspiration for these patrols, the methodologies and theoretical underpinnings of the 1990s queer street patrols were more firmly grounded in the work of the Guardian Angels, a nation-wide group aimed at preventing drug and gang related violence, which had been in existence

since 1979. The Pink Panthers, the SFSP, and the Q-Patrol all trained in self defense with the Guardian Angels. Whereas the Lavender Panthers and SMASH used stealth and physical violence, queer street patrols in the 1990s employed tactics that emphasized the threat of violence rather than actual violence itself: they patrolled on foot on a regular basis, and they sought through their presence to prevent crimes from happening in the first place.⁴⁵

What then, was the practice of these early 1990s queer patrols? Following the Guardian Angels' lead, the Pink Panthers, the SFSP, and the Q-Patrol were all interventionist in nature. According to Ellen Twinaime's article "Defending Ourselves," "An 'interventionist' patrol actually jumps into the fray and physically stops the bashing by any means necessary" (13).⁴⁶ Walking city streets on weekends and some weeknights in matching uniforms (largely, in queer neighborhoods or where gay bashings had been recently reported), these groups combatted violence on a number of fronts. Upon spotting a potentially explosive situation, members of these patrols used de-escalation techniques to prevent physical violence, and if necessary, blew whistles to call public attention to problems, and used walkie-talkies to communicate with each other and with the police. Patrols also interacted with local bartenders and owners of queer

⁴⁵ In this section, I focus on the efforts of The Pink Panthers, The SFSP, and the Q-Patrol, three groups that all trained with the Guardian Angels and seem to have had more similarities with one another than differences. Many, other groups in various cities and countries existed, but there has been considerably less documentation about them. See Karpf's article for brief mention of the South End Fruit Company, Philadelphia's Center City Nite Watch, and Dallas's Safety Patrol.

⁴⁶ Twinaime, one of the SFSP's members, writes that she learned that other patrols in other cities were "'watchdog patrols' whose main purpose was to provide a visual deterrent but in the event of an actual bashing they would merely shout, blow whistles, take pictures, and write down details, but not intervene" (13). Such watchdog patrols do important political and community work, I argue, but don't so much mobilize the threat of queer violence as mobilize the threat of police response.

establishments to determine if there might be anyone looking for trouble on a given evening. In the event that a gay bashing was already in progress, patrol members put themselves in between attackers and victims, physically intervening with their own bodies and making civilian arrests using handcuffs.

The uniformed (and in many cases, highly muscled) bodies of these queer patrols were crucial to accomplishing their goals. These were not groups that benefited from stealth, but rather, from being seen, heard, and instantly recognized. Karpf cites a SFSP information packet to explain that visibility is a key strategy for these groups:

While we gladly intervene in bashings as they occur, our purpose is better served (i.e. less queer blood is spilled) if we can stop bashings before they occur. We can do that effectively only if we are recognizable both to the community and to the bashers. The purpose of our uniforms, and especially of our berets, is to make us instantly recognizable to potential bashers. If they know who we are and what we do, and see us on the streets, they will be deterred from bashing.

Most articles that discuss these queer patrols describe the clothes they wear; the uniforms are designed to be immediately recognizable, and are also meant to be easily recalled in the long-term. Members of the Q-Patrol wore jeans, a white T-shirt with a coiled snake and the group's name on it, and black berets. Members of the SFSP instead opted for fuchsia berets, yet their T-shirts still featured a coiled serpent design. The Pink Panthers' T-shirts were black with a paw-print on a pink triangle; their uniforms were, if anything, too effective in gaining them visibility. In January 1991, MGM filed a copyright infringement lawsuit against the Pink Panthers because they believed the T-shirts were

too similar to advertising for the movie *Trail of the Pink Panther*. In October 1991, Judge Pierre Leval ruled that the group would have to change its name, since the confusion that these shirts and the group's name precipitated "could seriously impair the value and continued usefulness of its mark" for MGM. Though in the case of the Pink Panthers, this lawsuit might have been one of the central reasons for the group's dispersal, the fact that this lawsuit even took place means that the group was successful in obtaining a widespread visibility, one that contributed to the text of the city both in the moment and in the memory of its citizens.⁴⁷

Queer patrols also achieved visibility through their continued presence, by returning to the same neighborhoods and streets time and time again. Though an annual event like a Gay Pride Parade leaves its own positive and progressive mark on a city, it speaks more to issues of visibility (i.e., "We're here, we're queer") than to long-term change on the street and neighborhood levels. Parade routes get cleaned up, traffic patterns resume, and many members of a city choose to remain at home or leave town on the predetermined date of a Gay Pride Parade. This largely stems from the occasional nature of the event, rather than the quality of the parade or the passion and political savvy of the performers. Queer patrols, on the other hand, might appear anywhere and at anytime; at its prime, the Q-Patrol crisscrossed Seattle's Capitol Hill five nights a week. In *Disidentifications*, Muñoz details the commitment that social transformation requires: "Disidentifactory performances are performative acts of conjuring that deform and re-

⁴⁷ Paul Rudnick's 1993 play, *Jeffrey*, briefly features two of its more stylish protagonists taking part in the Pink Panthers. They model their uniforms for the play's main character, Jeffrey, complain about the MGM lawsuit, and gossip into a walkie-talkie. Ironically, they rescue Jeffrey from a group of aggressive gay men, but are nowhere to be found when he is later accosted by gay bashers. Still, Rudnick's inclusion of

form the world. *This reiteration builds worlds*. It proliferates ‘reals,’ or what I call worlds, and establishes the groundwork for *potential* oppositional counterpublics” (196). Here, Muñoz highlights both “reiteration” and “potential”; for potential change to become actualized, he suggests the need for many, many repetitions. In “Sex in Public,” Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner speak to the complex webs of performers and audiences necessary for this project: “By queer culture we mean a world-making project, where ‘world,’ like ‘public,’ differs from community or group because it necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points” (175). Berlant and Warner, like Muñoz, highlight the “potential” for counterpublics to become publics, for dominant ideologies to be overthrown. They note, “After a certain point, a quantitative change is a qualitative change. A critical mass develops” (177). Thus, the activism involved in a queer patrol’s performances is in working constantly towards changing enough peoples’ minds via propaganda, word of mouth, and a near continuous presence. In performance or politics, this is the way that worlds are made, ostensibly one neighborhood or city-street at a time.

Undoubtedly, some must have perceived the work of these queer patrols as aggressive or violent, especially as they imposed their bodies on a cityscape that occasionally resisted them, and when they sought to inflect neighborhoods as newly or once again safe for queers. Berlant and Warner hypothesize that “urban space is always a host space. The right to the city extends to those who use the city” (178). Thus, by walking the city, queer patrols not only speak out, but speak out loudly about their right

the Pink Panthers demonstrates the group’s visibility in Greenwich Village as well as within the general queer consciousness of the early 1990s.

to the city. At the same time, they deny the right to the city to other groups who seek to make it violently theirs. In “Anti-Gay Attacks Increase and Some Fight Back,” Constance L. Hays says, “Unlike other types of bias crimes, which often occur after the victim is perceived to have stepped into someone else’s territory. [. . .] Attacks on homosexuals often are committed by people who seek out their victims.” Thus, gay bashers travel to queer neighborhoods and seek to claim these places as their own violent playgrounds. Queer patrols, on the other hand, deny that the city may be used to that end.

These interventionist queer patrols have a curious relationship to Queer Nation’s popular slogan, “Bash Back.” Though many patrols had their roots in Queer Nation, they all eventually became independently run, and distanced themselves from its “Bash Back” philosophy for fairly obvious safety, legal, and ideological reasons. In his article, “San Francisco Street Patrol,” Christopher Disman notes, “SFSP members didn’t act on the QN slogan ‘Queers Bash Back!’ – they were expected not to act as vigilantes, behave punitively towards bashers, or escalate violence in any way.” Disman states that “carrying weapons to training, or patrol, or while wearing our colors,” “use of excessive force,” or “having the wrong attitude” were all grounds for dismissal from the group. Yet while this protocol was commonly understood amongst the patrols, these policies were not explained or made available to gay bashers, who likely fearing retribution, would often flee after seeing a patrol of six to ten capable and confident bodies moving quickly in their direction. Queer patrols benefited from Queer Nation’s slogan, even though they themselves (at least, in theory) refused to practice it. Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman suggest in “Queer Nationality,”

The menace of “Bash Back” reciprocates the menace of physical violence that keeps gays and lesbians invisible and/or physically restricted to their mythically safe neighborhoods. [. . .] “Bash Back” simply intends to mobilize the threat gay-bashers use so effectively – strength not in numbers, but in the presence of a few bodies who represent the potential for widespread violence – against the bashers themselves. In this way, the slogan turns the bodies of the Pink Panthers into a psychic counterthreat, expanding their protective shield beyond the confines of their physical “beat.” Perhaps the most assertive “bashing” that the uniformed bodies of the Pink Panthers deliver is mnemonic. (206-207)

Berlant and Freeman argue that these patrols are at their most effective when they cause gay bashers to imagine and fear that they themselves could be bashed. This theory makes sense considering the groups’ strategies of seemingly random patrols about the city; bashers never know how many patrol members are on duty, nor where or when they’ll (counter)strike. Through the use of the threat of violence, queer patrols dismiss the stereotypes of gays and lesbians as weak, sickly, or frail. Karpf notes, “Adam Z of the San Francisco Street Patrol points out that bashers ‘are not looking for a fight—they’re looking for a victim.’ A theme of the Street Patrol [. . .] was that gay bashers are looking specifically for someone they see as an easy target.” Queer patrols attempt to insert their own bodies and practices into a potential basher’s cognition, at best shattering perceptions of defenseless, solitary, and easily-victimized homosexuals.

Groups like the Pink Panthers, Safety Patrol, and Q-Patrol provided other options – ways of walking the city – with which gays and lesbians could live their lives.

Members of queer patrols were citizens in the best sense of the term. These individuals functioned as role models within the queer community, and their presence and interactions with heterosexuals demonstrated that other scripts than the stereotypes of gays and lesbians as insular, self-involved, and helpless were available. Far from being made up of only gay men, a patrol's ranks regularly included lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered people, and even straight allies. Though most patrols primarily sought to prevent anti-queer violence, the Q-Patrol in particular expanded its practices to "offer reassurance, assistance, escorts, and protection to anyone in need" ("Seattle Politics and Activism"). They provided free workshops to schools on verbal de-escalation, crisis intervention, and self defense, and sought to put an end to all hate crimes perpetrated in Seattle. Chroniclers of the Pink Panthers and the Street Patrol don't document the same dedication to the larger populace, yet it is inarguable that in each city, queers weren't the only beneficiaries of a patrol's labors. Participation in a queer patrol – the routine investment of time and energy, as well as the willing subjection of oneself to the possibility of insult and bodily harm – was a community service. Queer patrols further rewrote the text of the city by confirming that rather than frivolous, subcultural lives, queers were capable of civic investment and desired to be an active and visible part of the city's landscape.

In "Walking the City," a central chapter in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau theorizes a migrational city – one characterized and defined by motion, traffic, and bustle – as being most legible by examining how pedestrians navigate and use its spaces. He writes, "Pedestrian movements form one of these 'real systems whose existence in fact makes up the city'" (97). De Certeau begins his chapter by describing

the view from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center, a vantage point where one might be able to observe (or at least, better imagine) the operations of New York City and its inhabitants. He notes, “The ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below,’ below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk—an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it” (93). De Certeau suggests that the city is defined in any given moment by how it is being used, and posits pedestrian movement as an integral part of the text of the city. When considered individually, in groups, and over time, the “footsteps” that the inhabitants of the city take create the textures of the city: “Their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together” (97). Neighborhoods and districts are constituted and claimed when individuals and groups, like queer street patrols, begin or modify their movement practices, inscribing thicker, more frequent, or more elaborate patterns of footsteps which become the most recent edition of the city’s text.

Certainly, each individual or group’s footsteps are different in character; no two people have the exact same way of walking or making use of a city. De Certeau recognizes the importance of variation and style when considering the product of pedestrian movement. These footsteps, he notes, “cannot be counted because each unit has a qualitative character: a style of tactile apprehension and kinesthetic appropriation. Their swarming mass is an innumerable collection of singularities” (97). De Certeau admits to the difficulty of charting the text of a city precisely because of this multitude of styles. At the same time, however, he observes that this variety of individual and group

styles is essential to the make-up of the modern city. Style provides the city with color and complexity, and renders the text of each city unquestionably distinct from any other.

This diversity of styles becomes apparent when comparing various queer patrols. Though their goals are similar, their movement vocabularies – group size, patrol formation, interactions with the populace, and general comportment – are vastly different. For instance, Christopher Disman’s essay on the San Francisco Street Patrol emphasizes the group’s highly camp aesthetic, a feature that is either non-existent or not as pronounced in New York’s Pink Panthers and Seattle’s Q-Patrol. Disman cites a 1991 news flier which notes that in addition to patrolling in front of bars and clubs, intervening in anti-gay violence, and training in street combat techniques, the San Francisco group does “dish, cruise, and windowshop shamelessly.” While all queer patrols have an established chain of leadership, Disman points out that the Street Patrol’s “titles for these positions [first- and second-in-command on each patrol] were Hostess and Mistress, and the group’s elected leader was its Queen.” Even the relatively staid name, “San Francisco Street Patrol,” was a late change to the group’s identity and public practice. When members of the group first assembled in August 1990, they decided to call themselves DORIS SQUASH, short for Defend Our Rights In the Streets / Super Queers United Against Savage Heterosexism. Inarguably, a camp sensibility and a sense of humor were central to the operating procedure of the Street Patrol during their movements around Castro Street and adjoining neighborhoods. These urban queers were more than able to defend themselves and others, and found ways to look, sound, and be utterly fabulous while doing so. The Street Patrol’s style helped to further characterize

San Francisco as one of America's foremost gay Meccas, a place where individuals could pursue colorful and complex lives in relative safety.

De Certeau makes it clear that walking is never just about an individual moving from one place to another. Rather, walking is an act that always does something to the urban text; it leaves traces or evidence that may be seen or sensed by others who inhabit or seek to interpret the city. He states,

Walking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it "speaks." All the modalities sing a part in this chorus, changing from step to step, stepping through proportions, sequences, and intensities which vary according to the time, the path taken and the walker. These enunciatory operations are of an unlimited diversity. They therefore cannot be reduced to their graphic trail. (99)

Following the "graphic trail" (i.e., that the Q-Patrol regularly marched along Broadway from Mercer to Pike Street) is only the beginning of studying how a particular practice of walking affects the city. While this pathway might suggest what areas were traversed and perhaps suggest who might have come in contact with the pedestrians, it alone does not account for how these footsteps were embodied, nor when taken alone can it account for the ideas that it voiced or the emotions it inspired. Thus, a queer patrol witnessed in the moment would probably create an immediate sense of safety for gays and lesbians who might feel that they are both represented and protected.

Yet even after members of a patrol have physically moved on, their presence lingers and leaves some evidence of their passing: a literal footprint, a postscript in a police report, a vivid description passed on among bar-patrons, a life saved. These traces

all point towards inscriptions on the text of the city, no matter how minute they seem. Even though a number of years have passed since these groups patrolled, the unassailable fact remains that these groups did affect their respective cities. People have walked these streets in the past, whether or not people know or can sense it. De Certeau says, “There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can ‘invoke’ or not. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in” (108). The text of the city is a palimpsest, one which bears traces of all earlier iterations of the city. Even though new urban violence or conservative climates might obscure or undo some of the work that patrols once accomplished, the fact that these groups once rewrote the city suggests that they can do it again.

Despite anecdotal success stories of hate crimes prevented and congratulatory remarks by gays and straights alike, these patrols did not last long.⁴⁸ Following MGM’s lawsuit in 1991, New York’s Pink Panthers seem to have dropped off the map, rather than merely changing their names and uniforms. The San Francisco Street Patrol disbanded in 1994, perhaps in part due to what Judith Halberstam calls “‘subcultural fatigue’ – namely, the phenomenon of burnout among subcultural producers” (*In a Queer Time and Place* 156). Because of funding issues, Seattle’s Q-Patrol started and stumbled multiple times, yet resurfaced as recently as 2003 before vanishing again. All of these groups relied on volunteers to stay in business, and volunteers tended to only be plentiful when anti-gay violence was at its highest, or when the media saw fit to make it

⁴⁸ For instance, in *The Many Faces of Gay: Activists Who are Changing the Nation*, Arthur D. Kahn writes: “In a congratulatory statement to the Pink Panthers, Mayor David Dinkins admitted that the city was unable to protect the gay community against the intensifying gay bashing. ‘The city cannot succeed without your help,’ he declared. ‘Community patrols, such as the Pink Panthers, have provided the city and its citizens with a visible and effective means of deterrence’” (230).

newsworthy. Some group members may have quit out of boredom or because they were unable to see or sense any kind of measurable effect they were having on the city. America's relationship to queer communities has shifted too, and some of the most heated battles over queer issues in recent years have taken place in courts and in churches rather than on the streets. Yet even if cities have become more queer-friendly and ultimately safer for their minority inhabitants than at the start of the 1990s, it remains all the more important to investigate, remember, and attempt to reconstruct the very real ways that these groups wrote the text of the city through embodied performance and the use of the threat of queer violence.

The Pink Pistols

The Pink Pistols, a grassroots “gun enthusiast” organization with chapters across the United States, also invokes the threat of queer violence by symbolically positioning a few members of the queer community as “not to be messed with.” The group's genesis is both remarkable and instructive; it demonstrates the tangible change that can occur through one person imagining the strategic use of violence. In early 2000, gay journalist and author Jonathan Rauch wrote an article called “Pink Pistols” for *Salon.com* in which he described at least one instance of a gay-bashing being averted because one of the targeted victims possessed a gun. Fed up with hate-crime laws that “are at best insufficient, at worst ineffective,” Rauch called for members of queer communities to think towards ways of defending themselves:

Thirty-one states allow all qualified citizens to carry concealed weapons.

In those states, homosexuals should embark on organized efforts to

become comfortable with guns, learn to use them safely and carry them.

They should set up Pink Pistols task forces, sponsor shooting courses and help homosexuals get licensed to carry. And they should do it in a way that gets as much publicity as possible.

Rauch articulated a need for a different relationship between gays and guns; why, after all, shouldn't gays and lesbians take care of themselves in any (legal) way possible? In addition to carrying and becoming educated about firearms, Rauch's main argument was that it is the psychic threat of gays with guns that will best prevent anti-gay hate crimes: "If it became widely known that homosexuals carry guns and know how to use them, not many bullets would need to be fired. In fact, not all that many gay people would need to carry guns, as long as gay-bashers couldn't tell which ones did." In his assumed role as public intellectual for the gay and lesbian movement, Rauch imagined a way for queer individuals to both protect themselves and to project a spirit of self-sufficiency. Though Rauch didn't advocate ceasing all efforts towards hate crime legislation, he did suggest that the queer community couldn't just wait around for public opinion to shift and for laws to be passed.

Only a few months later, a businessman named Douglas Krick contacted Rauch and asked permission to use the name "Pink Pistols" for a group designed to put many of Rauch's ideas into practice. The first chapter of The Pink Pistols was founded in Boston in July 2000; scarcely a month later, a second group organized in Baltimore. The non-partisan group, according to their website, is "targeted at protecting the firearm rights of the 'alternative sexuality' communities." Beyond lobbying to protect second amendment rights for all queer Americans, members of each chapter go shooting together on a

regular basis, as both a means of improving their skills and as a social event for like-minded individuals. The group also seeks to train firearm novices: “We will help you select a firearm, acquire a permit, and receive proper training in its safe and legal use for self-defense. The more people know that members of our community may be armed, the less likely they will be to single us out for attack.” As of March 2007, the Pink Pistols’ website announced the existence of over 45 chapters in 31 states, as well as a new chapter started in British Columbia, Canada. Their national motto, “armed gays don’t get bashed,” emphasizes the self-defense aspect of the group’s strategy. Their symbol, on the other hand, focuses on the threat of violence by suggesting that any queer could be carrying a gun. It features the view from above of someone firing a pistol – a black triangle formed with the body and two arms of the shooter – superimposed over the pink triangle that has become an icon of gay pride worldwide. By using the pink triangle as well as a second triangle formed out of someone shooting a gun, their symbol suggests that carrying firearms and being trained in their use is an act of queer citizenship.

Importantly, the example of the Pink Pistols reiterates that techniques of imagined violence are inherently controversial. Most of the articles about the Pink Pistols describe how they are facing opposition from other gay and lesbian political groups, and are forging alliances in previously unimagined places. The “frequently asked questions” section of the Pink Pistols website explains that “you don’t need to be gay or have an alternative sexuality to join and shoot with us.” Such an openness to outsiders is often lacking in many queer organizations, and many journalists writing about the Pink Pistols remark on this aspect of the Pink Pistols. Steve Lowery describes a Virginia chapter where “the majority of the members are straight,” and Knute Berger describes how the

Seattle branch works with groups as diverse as the National Rifle Association, the state Libertarian Party, the Jewish Defense League, and the Microsoft Gun Club. Though such coalition building efforts may be precisely the outside-of-the-box thinking required to solve the hate crime problem, such a methodology means that members of the Pink Pistols often alienate, and find themselves alienated from, other gay and lesbians. Deroy Murdock's article, "Coming Out of the Closet," for example, cites Sue Hyde of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force: "I don't believe arming ourselves is a sustainable response to a subculture of hate towards homosexuality. We are not going to settle our scores as a community by having a shoot-out at the OK Corral." Murdock also quotes Clarence Patton of New York City's Anti-Violence Project, who like many others, worries that the Pink Pistols might make things worse: "I am, and we are, very anti-gun; we don't think guns solve any problems, and may cause more problems." Statements by members of the Pink Pistols are sometimes incredibly divisive, creating "us" and "them" categories within the queer community. In her article, "In the Pink," Mosi Secret quotes Xen Polk, a member of the Houston chapter of the Pink Pistols, on the issue: "The gays here aren't interested in joining the Pink Pistols. They give in to the gay stereotype of weakness." Polk's inflammatory remark is a gross oversimplification of the issue, of course, and exactly the sort of all-or-nothing thinking that turns many gays and lesbians against the group. However, Gwendolyn Patton, the national media spokesperson for the Pink Pistols, does little to downplay such incendiary remarks; allowing the media to emphasize such dissension within the gay and lesbian movement is probably one of the Pink Pistols' most savvy strategies. Disagreements within queer communities provide easy articles for mainstream presses, and Patton and the Pink Pistols recognize that

publicity of any kind can only help achieve their goal: the widespread circulation of the idea that some gays have guns.

The Houston chapter of the Pink Pistols also drew controversy from the local queer community because it suggested, as Mosi Secret explains, that “Pink Pistols should replace [Houston’s] Q-Patrol – that Pink Pistols was the next step in the evolution of self-defense.” Like other patrols nation-wide, Houston’s Q-Patrol lacked the volunteer resources to patrol as often as was necessary, and some of the members of the Houston Pink Pistols called attention to that fact. In retrospect, such a fight seems petty; with the goal of deterring anti-gay violence in common, there is no reason why the two groups couldn’t have co-existed and even collaborated. Queer street patrols mobilized the threat of violence by suggesting that a group of people might appear anywhere throughout the city to stop hate crimes. The Pink Pistols, on the other hand, advocate self-reliance and instead use the threat of violence to suggest that any single queer person might be armed. Furthermore, the Pink Pistols extend the threat of queer violence beyond just the gay neighborhoods in urban areas on which queer patrols focus. Though members of the Pink Pistols gather frequently for training and social events, the threat that they carry is more applicable when they are alone. The Pink Pistols organization circulates the possibility that a single queer body, even in the heartland of rural America, could potentially be a dangerous one. Though the Pink Pistols’ strategies might be more sustainable in the long run, ongoing anti-gay violence in both urban and rural America suggests the need for diverse and local solutions to the problem.

In his article that first inspired the organization, Rauch described the sudden outpouring of sympathy among heterosexual Americans in the wake of Matthew

Shepard's murder as problematic, especially considering decades of other brutal anti-gay murders whose victims were barely noticed. Rauch posits, "Shepard was small, helpless, and childlike. He never had a chance. This made him a sympathetic figure of a sort that is comfortingly familiar to straight Americans: the weak homosexual." Rauch railed against hate crime laws because they do nothing to counter such a perception, but rather, encourage it – that queers need to be taken care of with protection from the greater heterosexual mainstream. Though Rauch was careful not to discourage those who want to pursue traditional forms of lobbying and activism for hate crimes – he argued that the Pink Pistols are "fully compatible with other, more traditional kinds of civil-rights measures" – he articulated that the change in self-esteem and image that the Pink Pistols could create for queers is essential to reducing anti-gay violence. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many other articles written about the Pink Pistols also mention Matthew Shepard, and some outspoken members of the Pink Pistols use his murder to frame their project: "If Matthew Shepard had a gun in his sock, he'd still be alive today" (Kulczyk). The Pink Pistols' rhetoric is difficult to counter; by raising the ghost of Matthew Shepard, they use both emotion and logic to justify their existence and necessity. In "Gays & Guns," Knute Berger writes, "To many Seattleites, all guns are bad and no one should have them. But then, the average Seattleite isn't as likely to wind up beaten and tied to a fence as Matthew Shepard." Berger's argument is leveled against urban anti-gun gays; by naming Shepard, he indicates that rural queers desperately need to be able to protect themselves. Yet by suggesting that the urban gay isn't "as likely" to become the victim that Matthew was, he still characterizes Seattle's queer population as vulnerable. In so

doing, Rauch and the Pink Pistols call for mobilizing the threat of queer violence both in urban and rural communities.

There exists a sort of democratic appeal to the strategy of the Pink Pistols; the threat of queers being able to defend themselves extends beyond just gay men. Most of the articles written about the Pink Pistols mention lesbians and transsexuals within the group, as well as straight allies. The Pink Pistols' website showcases posters (presumably, those hung in gun clubs and meeting halls advertising the group) targeted at diverse groups. One poster features a woman holding a shotgun. It reads: "A Strong Woman and Well-Armed: Her Kids are Safe." The text of another poster reads: "Politicians tell us to run away from criminals. Some of us find such advice hard to follow. EVERYONE has a right to self-defense." The picture on the poster features a wheelchair in the center of the poster, and a holstered pistol beneath. By featuring a diverse membership in the press and on their website, the Pink Pistols seek not only to arm as many people as possible, but to extend the image of a strong and self-assured individual to all members of the queer community. Murdock concludes his article on the Pink Pistols by quoting Krick's theory on the inclusiveness of the group: "As the saying goes, 'God made all men, but Colt made all men equal.'" Guns have long served all ages, classes, and races; Krick and the Pink Pistols argue that it's time for the queer community to claim the same option of protection available to everyone else.

As with the work of the queer street patrols, it is difficult to measure the overall effectiveness of the Pink Pistols – whether their efforts have shifted the overall public consciousness and/or deterred many crimes. I argue that their mobilization of the threat of violence is in itself a useful contribution to the diversity of ways with which anti-gay

violence is combatted. Certainly, their approach to coalition building and embracing allies in unusual places is an innovative and productive way of fighting back against anti-gay violence. The fact that they engender controversy and combat complacency within queer communities can also generally be looked at as positive; their very existence only highlights the ongoing problem with hate crimes and prompts debate about how best to labor towards ending them. Yet at times, the group stumbles in their rhetoric, as when Krick tries prematurely to claim widespread success for the Pink Pistols: “While I can’t say that we are completely responsible for it, I can say that there has not been a ‘fag bashing’ in any of the towns where we have chapters after our chapters were founded” (Murdoch). Krick’s claim of the group’s success is hasty (if not altogether inaccurate), and fails to emphasize the need for continuous activism and vigilance. For instance, the existence of a Michigan chapter of the Pink Pistols failed to protect Andrew Athos this past February.⁴⁹

How then to best conceptualize the work of the Pink Pistols? De Certeau’s view from far above the city seems somehow inappropriate; the Pink Pistols, after all, exist both in cities and in rural areas, and their “walking” a particular route doesn’t define or claim space in the same way that street patrols did. Because of the numerous references to Matthew Shepard within the existing literature on the Pink Pistols, I’m compelled to imagine an altogether different metaphoric vantage point. Imagery of Matthew’s final

⁴⁹ Though Murdock’s article (and Krick’s claim) are from mid-2002, I find it problematic that a group that needs a continuous stream of publicity to survive and to achieve its aims has not updated its web page in years. Their chapter list was last updated on January 2nd, 2004, and no new articles or press releases have been posted since August 23, 2003. Rauch’s suggestion to “get as much publicity as possible” seems to have been set aside, which is really too bad; any violence – especially when as horrific as the slaying of Andrew Athos – has the potential to generate discussion and action both within the Pink Pistols and within society as a whole.

view from a hill on the outskirts of his rural Wyoming town permeates many articles, books, and dramatizations of Matthew Shepard's life. Dennis Shepard, Matthew's father, explained in his speech to the court before Aaron McKinney's sentencing that Matthew had "his lifelong friends" with him while he was dying tied to a fence, that night: "[H]e had the beautiful night sky with the same stars and moon that we used to see through a telescope" (Shepard). Further descriptions throughout *The Laramie Project* also support Dennis Shepard's illustration of the "sparkling lights" of Laramie. I believe that Matthew's vision of isolated points of light in the distance – a blurred constellation of stars and street lamps – is a fitting perspective with which one might theorize the work of the Pink Pistols. They are a group of individuals who confidently exist in both the urban and the rural, whose labors seek to extend an aura of protection to all queer subjects, and whose work collectively builds towards the dawning of a day when anti-gay violence is just a relic of the past.

Imagining Violence

Most books on hate crimes conclude with a set of policy implications and possible strategies for addressing the problem. Few, however, stop to consider how art, performance, or other forms of representation might be used to discourage violence against minorities. Judith Halberstam's essay, "Imagined Violence/Queer Violence: Representations of Rage and Resistance," first published in 1993 for the journal *Social Text* and later revised for McCaughey and King's *Reel Knockouts: Violent in the Movies*, is a polemical work that explores precisely such possibilities. In its first iteration, it "responded to a climate of unacceptable complacency in the wake of the L.A. rebellion

following the Rodney King beating, and it attempted to link kamikaze AIDS terrorism to other forms of political rage” (245). When Halberstam revisited her essay almost a decade later, she reframed her essay around the “different stakes different people might have in rhetorics of retaliation, revenge, and violent response” (245). Her essay, both in its original and its revised form, speaks to the ongoing necessity to speak to violence in creative and critically informed ways.

Halberstam convincingly argues that “it is by imagining violence that we can harness the force of fantasy and transform it into productive fear” (248). She celebrates works of art that come from “a place of rage,” those that portray unsanctioned violence by minorities against oppressive regimes. Though she doesn’t advocate real violence in any way, she is invested in the complex relationship between imagined violence and real violence, especially as the two interact in such unforeseeable ways. As an example, she discusses rap singer Ice-T’s 1992 “Cop Killer,” a song that doesn’t call for people to commit violence against the police (as many of the song’s critics contend), but instead seeks to warn, if not instill real fear in the police by raising the spectre of an imminent, violent response to police brutality. She writes,

It is also in the realm of fantasy and representations that we make the system nervous, and that we can control and use our illusions.

Imagination, in other words, goes both (or many) ways. So, what if we imagine a new violence with a different object; a postmodern terror represented by another “monster” with quite other “victims’ in mind?” (249-250)

Halberstam's argument, of course, focuses on (and requires) the reception of members of the "system," the straight, white, men who are the cause of the rage and who become the victims within the imaginary violence. These representations confront dominant ideologies and those who most benefit from them with the possibility of danger; artistic portrayals of imaginary violence threaten that this violence could, if intolerable situations persist, manifest as real.

Although Halberstam describes the exciting possibilities of the threat of violence to make these men fearful, she only briefly gestures towards the direct effect that imagined violence can have on its marginalized practitioners. For instance, during her analysis of *Thelma and Louise*, she writes that such films suggest "not that we all pick up guns, but that we allow ourselves to imagine the possibilities of fighting violence with violence" (251). But rather than continuing along these lines to consider the value of these images when received by women – that women can be powerful, self-sufficient, dangerous, and worthy of respect – she instead focuses on the question of "how do we produce a fear of retaliation in the rapist?" (251). By primarily focusing on effecting change within the straight white men in the audience, Halberstam largely neglects to consider how these images might be instructive and empowering to the minorities that they represent. In *This Thing of Darkness: Reclaiming the Queer Killer in Contemporary Drama*, Jordan Schildcrout writes, "The queer killer reverses the homophobic order in which queer people are subjected to violence because they are powerless, undesirable, and expendable. This reversal is a form of queer empowerment, and also a form of revenge, dramatizing the radical political entreaty to 'Bash Back'" (24). Schildcrout speaks to issues of queer reception of the violent, queer killer archetype, and

demonstrates the generative psychic restructuring that such representations enable. He writes, “Most people do not commit monstrous acts, but we’re fascinated by those who do, perhaps because they allow us to recognize, exercise, and potentially exorcize, the ‘part’ of ourselves that has the ability to commit monstrous acts. The queer killer is not the villain among us, but the villain in all of us” (21). In addition to allowing queer subjects to recognize and exercise their own violent desires, Schildcrout’s reformulation of Aristotle’s concept of catharsis emphasizes the “potential” aspect of purgation – ultimately, such a dismissal of the possibility of angry or calculated queer violence might be neither achievable nor desirable. Taken together, Halberstam and Schildcrout’s analyses highlight how the threat of violence has world-making possibilities for both straights and queers, a particularly important consideration for theatre practitioners who might seek to address hybrid audiences.

Halberstam’s article extols the value of spontaneity and the honoring of all emotions, including anger and rage. She observes,

Tactics of non-violence seem to have become dangerously hegemonic rather than disruptive. In political demonstrations, indeed, outrage often takes a back seat to organized, formal, and decorous show of disapproval. [. . .] Such expressions [of anger and rage], after all, might lead to something spontaneous, something that spills across the carefully drawn police lines, something threatening. (248-249)

Interestingly, Halberstam’s militant aesthetic matches that of those who fought at Stonewall, refusing to repress their anger or embrace the plodding activism of groups like Mattachine or the Daughters of Bilitis, which instead tended to pursue social change via

the sympathy and influence of heterosexual allies. Randy Shilts documents the ways that Harvey Milk similarly prized and encouraged anger and rage in his community, especially in comparison to the other gay politicians and activists of San Francisco in the 1970s who were much more cautious, quiet, and well-mannered (246). Historians, scholars, activists, and politicians have long struggled with what to do with anger when striving for social change. In *Making Trouble*, John D’Emilio weighs in on this issue:

A politics of rage weakens and destroys its proponents and their cause more effectively than it weakens and destroys an oppressive system. [. . .] Yes, we have to feel these things. [. . .] But a movement that mobilizes a constituency on the basis of pain will end up feeling its way to despair, disillusionment, and, ultimately, failure. I would much prefer that we think our way to success. (223)

D’Emilio’s essay strikes a balance between militancy and inaction; his preference is for a critically-engaged activist community, rather than one founded and motivated exclusively by rage. I believe that thinking the way to success, however, shouldn’t diminish or jettison the possibility of using violence or its threat altogether.

In the remainder of this chapter, I consider two plays that further explore all of these issues that Halberstam, Schildcrout, and D’Emilio raise. Both *The West Street Gang* and *Lesbians Who Kill* feature responses to homophobia and sexism that are full of rage – that are charged emotionally, politically, and even erotically. Yet these plays also feature the same characters thinking through the nature of violence, playing with the possibilities of various types of violent resistance and retaliation, and exploring the utility of the threat of queer violence. To varying degrees, *The West Street Gang* and *Lesbians*

Who Kill both offer characters who may promote fear in their audiences, as well as characters who think about and discuss ways to promote fear in other characters. These plays, then, actually stage the debates common to many queer discourses surrounding violence, as well as demonstrate the theoretical underpinnings of groups past and present such as queer street patrols and the Pink Pistols. In doing so, these plays imagine ways that minority groups can conceptualize the threat of queer violence as a world-making enterprise.

The West Street Gang

Doric Wilson's "polemical satire in two acts," *The West Street Gang*, investigates the dividing line between imagining violence and committing real violence, and actually stages one gay community's debate about how to best to use the threat of violence to effect social change. Written in the mid-1970s, Wilson's play responded to the regular gay bashings in and around Greenwich village, as well as to the national wave of homophobic backlash that was led by conservative California state senator John Briggs and the founder of the "Save Our Children" campaign, Anita Bryant. The first production of *The West Street Gang* was site specific; it was set in the Spike, a New York City leather bar where Wilson was a bartender and manager. Produced by Wilson's company, The Other Side of Silence, the play opened in early June 1977 and ran for six months, and was then revived the following year in repertory with another of Wilson's plays, *A Perfect Relationship*. *The West Street Gang* was also the first success for San Francisco's gay theatre company, Theatre Rhinoceros, in large part because of their decision to stage their production in the Black and Blue, a local leather bar. As the play

is set in the Chain Gang, “a not so popular bar on West Street near the waterfront of downtown Manhattan” (1), these two early site specific productions blurred the boundaries between the bar patrons within the play and the members of the audience, allowing for a collective imagining of strategies to combat anti-gay violence. Though both of these early productions were financially successful, they had a limited visibility outside of the gay and lesbian community, attracting little in the way of critical or scholarly attention.

Like *Street Theater*, the first act of *The West Street Gang* features a veritable parade of mid-70s gay “types”: a muscled bartender named Flex, an S&M couple named Jack and Marley, a “maleactormodeldancersinger” named Brent Wood, a “bibulous bon vivant” named Bender, and others (iv). Initially, the characters lament that it is a slow night at the bar; they pass the time by cruising one another and trading barbs. The first major action of the play occurs when a character named Shanghai Lil, a “tenacious transvestite” (7), enters the bar wearing full leather and carrying a large suitcase. He retires to the restroom, only to emerge some time later, to various characters’ astonishment, disgust, and protests, in “*spectacular high drag. He is a scarlet and peroxidized vision of glamour gone wrong*” (23).⁵⁰ Lil’s drag is an inspired act of defiance against the enforced butch-ness of the leather bar, a dress code that is posted on the wall. He explains that he is acting within the letter of the law: “The sign clearly reads, ‘Persons entering the Chain Gang must be attired in strict accordance with the dress code.’ I entered the bar in very strict accordance. [. . .] No where on that sign does it say that after

⁵⁰ As opposed to his use of feminine pronouns for Boom Boom and Ceil in *Street Theater*, Wilson refers to Lil throughout his stage directions as “he,” a pattern that I follow.

entering the bar, a person can't slip into something more comfortable" (23). Lil's act of gender transgression sets him up as both a "thinker" and a "fighter," eager to embrace conflict as necessary.

Later, as Lil is leaving the bar – he claims that "I only stopped by to bring a bit of glamour into your otherwise colorless lives" – an "aging midnight cowboy" named Colorado stumbles in, looking much the worse for wear (25). He explains that he has just been bashed and robbed by a local band of street toughs:

Punks. Little punks. Seven, maybe eight of them. They got baseball bats and bike chains and broken beer bottles. They start mouthing off, calling me "faggot" and "queer" and "cocksucker"—so I roll a cigarette. This leaves the little punks unimpressed. This one shithead says to me, "Give me your money, faggot." I say to him, "You want money, sell your ass, same as me." Shithead takes umbrage at my well-meant advice and swings a baseball bat at my head, suddenly I'm smack dab in the middle of a rerun of Custer's last stand. When the dust settles, I am butt up in the gutter. The punks are gone. Also my five, my subway token, my lucky silver dollar belt buckle and my left boot. I mean, I ask you . . . what the fuck's this country coming to when hustlers get rolled? (25)

The group is quick to sympathize with Colorado; many of them have already been chased, harassed, or hurt by this same gang. They discuss rumors that the gang has already killed a number of people that year, so much so that people in the neighborhood are afraid to go out in public without being accompanied by a female, for fear that they'll look gay. The group exchanges coping strategies: watching where they walk, taking

cabs, getting stoned, and so forth. One character admits, “I always linger over my last drink – just in case it is my last drink” (26). Wilson describes the violence that his characters deal with on a daily basis, and illustrates how they’ve normalized the fear that comes with it. Their anger briefly bubbles into an imagining of collective action and retaliation:

JACK: We should band together.

MARK: Fight back?

VIRGO: Vigilantes!

COLORADO: We form a posse!

FLEX: We catch the punks.

BRENT: We give them a fair trial.

BENDER: We lynch them. (27)

Such ideas are momentarily set aside as Colorado goes to call the police. Before he can even place the call, however, two cops enter the bar. Completely disinterested in Colorado’s story, they are there only to issue a parking ticket to one of the bar’s patrons for chaining his bike to a parking meter. As they exit, Wilson’s unsympathetic cops explain, “You live in a city like this, you take your chances” (32), proving to the bar’s patrons and the play’s audience that the fight against hate crimes has to be waged from within the gay community. To make the point clear, Wilson ends the act with a disheveled Lil returning to the bar, with Butch, the leader of the gang that has been targeting queers, in tow. Butch whines, “She attacked us! She jumped us like a bitch in heat!” (35). Having been accosted by the gang, Lil fought back fiercely, emphatically stating that neighborhood violence against his gay community will no longer be tolerated.

At the beginning of the second act, Lil is celebrated as the bar's hero, alternately as "the man of the hour," "the woman of the year," "a regular Joan of Arc," and "Che Guevara in heels" (38). Not only do these comments illustrate the group's newfound respect for Lil, but through such allusions, they bring into the bar's public forum the discourse of violent revolution and holy war, the sort of grand thinking necessary to motivate the community to collective action. As they search Butch they find Colorado's belt buckle and money, as well as a handful of stolen credit cards and a switchblade knife, the last of which prompts them to remember having seen Butch's photograph in the paper for having killed someone in the neighborhood. This discovery marks a moment of rupture for the characters; they realize that they can either do something productive in their unique situation, or that they can go back to "sitting in the bar," "complaining about how the gangs bash us," and "griping about how nobody does anything about it" (45).

Rather than turning Butch over to the police or the justice system, neither of which does the community have any faith in, they opt to hold him hostage, ostensibly until they can themselves do something to enact change. To a degree, the group enacts their earlier ideas about what to do with the criminals: in lieu of giving him a "fair trial," they arrange themselves into an ad hoc kangaroo court, eager to pronounce Butch guilty and lynch him. Once the group does pronounce him guilty, Butch tries to make a plea-bargain, first offering that his gang will protect the "faggots," and then suggesting that all of the gangs will unite and sign a "unilateral surrender" (51). The gays opt instead to begin protecting themselves, and they drag Butch towards the bar's backroom, presumably, to enact real violence on him.

They are stopped by the entrance of Dr. Foeller McLeary, a “gay lib personality” and member of the “Gay Defensive Front,” and Arthur Klang, “a syndicated gossipmonger.” McLeary and Klang attempt to orchestrate a media event, using the bar patrons as “terrorists” and the clean-cut McLeary as the person who can deescalate the situation. McLeary understands and seeks to mobilize the value of threats, both on the macro- and the micro-levels. His proposed dramatization and broadcast of a hostage standoff is paralleled by the seriousness with which he warns Butch “With that barstool, I can crush your head like an overripe cantaloupe” (54). Yet Wilson portrays McLeary and his Gay Defensive Front as ineffectual buffoons, more concerned with appearances than with social change. Arthur and McLeary insult almost all of the bar patrons in turn, extolling, “You’re not what we at the GDF like to think of as representative homosexuals” (56). With this section of the play, Wilson expresses his distrust of the slow-to-effect-change labors of activist groups like the Gay Liberation Front that seek to co-opt individuals’ actions and identities for their own political ends. Progress against anti-gay sentiments, Wilson suggests, needs to happen on the level of the community and the individual, and not through legislation or nation-wide mass-media appeals.

To complicate matters, Wilson throws another dissenting voice into the fray: *“BNITA ARYANT, a concerned citizen, enters from the street, carrying a basket of oranges and a petition. Her entrance should seem to interrupt the progress of the play. She must be played for reality”* (57). BNITA represents Anita Bryant, of course,⁵¹ and

⁵¹ In case the basket of oranges, petition, and religious zealotry don’t make the point clear enough, Wilson notes on his character list that “Productions are also welcome to change the character name to ANITA BRYANT” (iv).

her entrance gives the patrons of the Chain Gang an opportunity to observe and confront for themselves the connections between conservative Christian crusades and hate crimes. Wilson's instruction that the character isn't to be played for laughs indicates the seriousness of anti-gay movements. At the same time, however, he suggests her ridiculousness by having her stumble into a leather bar and mistake the gay patrons as "America's longshoremen" (58) who might be supportive of her cause. After Bnita figures out she is on hostile turf, she and Lil get into a fight, one that is broken up by Butch, of all people, who warns Bnita of Lil's fighting prowess. Noticing Butch for the first time, Bnita asks if he is "under the process of indoctrination" (61), and struggles with McLeary and Arthur for his custody. Lil steps in and tells all three of them to let go of Butch; Lil and the other bar patrons coalesce into a unified community for the first time, and they collectively command Bnita, McLeary, and Arthur to leave their bar. Bnita makes one last effort to claim their hostage for herself:

I will not leave this child! (*To BUTCH.*) These are homo-sex-u-als. Homosexuality is against nature. If this were not so, God would have made Adam and Bruce. [. . .] Sperm is the most concentrated form of blood. The homosexual is eating life. That's why God calls homosexuality an abomination. [. . .] We'll gather all you little children together—we'll form an army. Yes! My own little army. A children's crusade. We'll take over the world! (64)⁵²

⁵² Frighteningly, this speech isn't at odds with Wilson's instruction that "she must be played for reality." In his description of Bryant, a pop singer and Miss America runner-up who had the public's ear, Randy Shilts notes that "she had a penchant for making outrageous comments" (156). For instance, she has argued publicly that if gays are given rights, then next the government will need to give rights to "prostitutes and to people who sleep with St. Bernards and to nailbiters."

Bnita's efforts backfire; Butch pulls away from her, claiming: "I'm safer with them than I am with you" (64). When faced with the opposition of the bar's patrons who powerfully assert themselves as "The real West Street Gang," (65), Bnita, McLeary, and Arthur flee the bar, leaving Butch behind.

The group's solution to anti-gay violence is inspired by witnessing Butch's denouncement of Bnita. They interpret Butch as a success story, someone they have won over to their side by standing up for themselves as a unified group, unwilling to be victims any longer. Though they threaten Butch that they will be watching to be sure he doesn't get out of line, they also decide to reform him through giving him "guidance," "discipline," "love," and "affection" (65). The play ends not with action, but with the newly constituted West Street Gang envisioning the power of this strategy if they were to reiterate it on a larger scale:

MARK: And this is how you're going to accomplish safety in the streets?

VIRGO: Sure.

JACK: As long as he's with us-

MARLEY: -he's perfectly safe.

LIL: And so are we.

VIRGO: Maybe that is the solution!

COLORADO: Sure!

BRENT: That's it!!

MARLEY: We all go out in the streets-

JACK: -and forcibly adopt a punk.

LIL: Don't you love it! (65-66)

Importantly, their strategy comes not from one person, and not from some preexisting national political group, but through collaborative problem-solving. Wilson's answer to anti-gay violence is suitably complex; his characters propose to combat hate crimes through cohesive action, through the mobilization of the threat of violence, through reaching out to those who don't understand them, and through deciding not to be victims anymore. Most importantly, *The West Street Gang* articulates the need for queer communities to continue to talk about hate crimes, and to continue to imagine diverse ways to make the world better.

The gay men in Wilson's play take the threat of violence against their community and invert it, albeit, with a difference. By the play's end, they resolve to invade the streets, making dangerous what was once a safe place for homophobes. The members of the West Street Gang tell Butch that they'll be both watchdogs and interventionists, as necessary, and they show Butch not just that they are able to take care of themselves, but that they are going to take care of one another. Such a vision of a gay gang overturns stereotypes of easily victimized queers and marks a decisive end to their old preconceptions of the idea that "Being the object of attack is synonymous with being gay" (46). Their resolution to work together signals that they will no longer allow themselves to be singled out as targets, nor will they continue to suffer persecution in silence. On its own, such solidarity is formidable, but the members of the West Street Gang couple their new image with a plan for innovative action. With the idea to "forcibly adopt" homophobic street toughs, they offer education with an edge, a plan to use their minds to spread the good word about homosexuals, and to back it up with an embodied threat of violence should intolerance surface. Their desire to (re)educate the

street youths also directly combats Bnita Aryant's claims that homosexuals only desire to seduce the children of America. In "The Queer History and Politics of Lesbian and Gay Studies" (1995, revised 2000), George Chauncey responds to real-life campaigns that promote images of predatory queers and vulnerable children:

Now at one level the fears of antigay activists are utterly groundless, of course. We aren't going to molest or seduce their children. In that respect those children have got a lot more to fear at home than they do at school. But they are right in another sense. *We do want to change their children.* And by our presence as openly gay educators whose every word and action challenges the demonization of homosexuals and bisexuals, *we will change their children.* [. . .] We do want to change all people into people who accept and respect sexual diversity, because that will make our lives and the lives of gay children and those other children's lives better. (312-313)

Predating Chauncey's essay by nearly two decades, *The West Street Gang* offers a pedagogy – one of pride, strength, and solidarity – designed to both teach and threaten an end to anti-gay violence.

The threat of violence is present even within Wilson's sparse stage directions for the climatic fight between Lil and Bnita. Colorado makes the mistake of suggesting that while working as a hustler, he once shared a street corner with Bnita's husband. An enraged Bnita moves to attack him, until Lil (again) comes to Colorado's defense. They exchange insults and threats, eventually prompting Bnita to respond by threatening Lil: "(Drawing a line on the floor with her foot.) Step across that line, you overripe tomato.

(LIL steps across the line, BNITA backs up, draws a second line.) Step across that one” (61). As opposed to the threats of Lil and the rest of the West Street Gang, Bnita’s threat is empty, and even poorly articulated; she neglects to mention what will happen to Lil if she dares cross the line, giving Lil no reason not to trespass into Lil’s space. At some moment in the scene, however, the threat of violence converts to actual physical violence. Wilson indicates that Butch “*breaks them up*” (61), though Wilson never explicitly describes how they’ve physically engaged following Bnita’s line-in-the-sand gambit. His only clue to directors (and fight choreographers) for how to accomplish this action is a note towards the beginning of the scene: “*A homage to the fight scene in Destry Rides Again follows*” (61). *Destry Rides Again*, a 1939 George Marshall film starring James Stewart, is perhaps best remembered for a lengthy barroom fight scene between actresses Marlene Dietrich and Una Merkel. This fight scene in *Destry Rides Again* is both ferocious and epic, and very much a significant moment within the film.⁵³ By invoking *Destry Rides Again* in his stage direction, Wilson is challenging those directors, choreographers, and actors working on his play to not skimp on this moment of staged violence, but rather, to foreground the battle between two fierce and larger-than-life characters as momentous and essential to the meaning of the play. Thematically, this scene should articulate one possible result of the threat of violence: the likely possibility that such a threat may need to be backed up with physical action.

Though the threat of queer violence is effectively imagined and accomplished within the play – Butch, and to a lesser degree, Bnita, McLeary and Arthur are genuinely

⁵³ Many internet fan sites note that *Destry Rides Again* contains one of the most famous and important “catfights” in cinema history.

fearful of retaliatory violence – *The West Street Gang*'s threat of queer violence has a less easy transfer to the real world. Halberstam's straight white men who may be made uneasy or panicked by mainstream fare such as "Cop Killer" or *Thelma and Louise* are unlikely to see *The West Street Gang*, a gay play by a gay playwright, set and (and perhaps staged) in a gay bar, likely produced by a gay theatre company, and presumably, catering to a largely gay (or gay-friendly) audience. Wilson gave himself permission to structure his play as a comedy, perhaps knowing that he would have little need to frighten or otherwise speak directly to homophobic audiences. In using this genre, he expects his audience to laugh at the illogic and stupidity of gay bashers and religious zealots, and if so moved, to begin to confront such real-world problems intellectually. The primary political work of Wilson's play is to present characters who come in to power through claiming it – none, save Lil, could really be looked to as role-models from their first entrance – an action arrived at through both rage and generative, problem-solving debate. The play's ending effectively (and purposefully) leaves the threat of queer violence unfulfilled; though Butch has been on the receiving end of both real and threatened violence, the play itself does not stage the characters carrying out their plan on the streets of New York. To do so, of course, would stretch the already utopic finale of Wilson's comedy beyond the point of believability, and perhaps even close down possibilities for how to effect such real-world change. The play begins and ends in the Chain Gang, a place for the play's characters to dream up a new relationship to violence. Similarly, Wilson intends the Spike, the Black and Blue, or whatever theatre proper his play lands in to be merely the setting for fantasizing and strategizing about new methodologies of

activism and violence, ways of setting Halberstam and the West Street Gang's ideas into motion.

Despite the comedy of Wilson's play, *The West Street Gang* has some disturbing moments that would have resonated as all-too-real for its original audiences in San Francisco. As she is being expelled from the bar, Bnita Aryant promises: "[J]ust you remember one thing, my dearies, you still have not heard the last of me" (65). Without any historical context or dramaturgical support, the line could easily slip by unnoticed in a production today. The play opened, however, on June 7th, 1977, the exact day that Bnita's real-life counterpart led conservative Dade County voters overwhelmingly to repeal a recent gay rights ordinance. Anita Bryant's five-month anti-gay campaign ended in a landslide win, marking an abrupt end for what was supposed to be "the year of the gay,"⁵⁴ and heralding the beginning of a series of repeals of gay rights laws across the nation. Even more sinister were the wave of hate crimes that accompanied these conservative victories. According to Shilts, "Random beatings of gays increased sharply in the Castro after Bryant's win. Not robberies or muggings, just violent attacks" (161). In *Violence Against Lesbians and Gay Men*, sociologist Gary David Comstock makes the link even more explicit:

Bryant's campaign, not unlike McCarthy's, provoked and inspired violence against lesbians and gay men. [. . .] Robert Hillsborough, a gay

⁵⁴ In *The Mayor of Castro Street*, Randy Shilts describes the achievements that the gay and lesbian movement made in early 1977. He writes about the Dade County vote in January in favor of a broad gay rights ordinance, gay rights bills in twenty-eight state legislatures by late spring, and the first meeting ever at the White House for a delegation of gay leaders (155). Such advances suggest why the June 7th repeal of the Dade County ordinance would be so devastating, much less the months of conservative backlash that would follow.

man, was murdered in San Francisco by two teenage boys, quoted by witnesses as having shouted, “Here’s one for Anita,” as one stabbed the body of the man fifteen times. Other incidents, in which shouts of “Anita is right” accompanied gang rape and beating, were noted in other periodicals following the successful vote for repeal in Dade County. (26)

Wilson makes a mockery of Anita Bryant in his play, one example of a type of fighting back that is available through dramatic representation. In particular, Lil scores a number of easy points against Bnita, calling her a “media hog,” an “ascorbic acid queen,” and even “Miss Second Runner-up” (61). *The West Street Gang* allowed its audiences to momentarily channel their anger, sorrow, and loss into a shared experience of laughing through the pain, and in particular, laughing at those who caused the pain. Yet the nation’s conservative backlash against the gay and lesbian movement’s progress and the anti-gay violence done in Bryant’s name in particular highlight the limits of Wilson’s script: unless it moves the audience to seriously consider the problem at hand, the victory of the West Street Gang rings hollow. As the play is always set in “the present” (iv), Wilson’s translation of Anita Bryant to Bnita Aryant allows the character to be not just a thing of the past, but to stand in for the latest antagonist and symbolize ongoing political hurdles for America’s queer citizens.

Disconcertingly, Bryant’s charges of child molestation haven’t been completely dismissed even thirty years after Wilson wrote *The West Street Gang*, a work that only seldom reads as out of date. Anita Bryant herself may have fallen out of the public eye, but she’s been replaced by countless others in the last three decades, many of whom have been even stronger opponents. A revision of the script in 2000 adds that “theaters

interested in producing this play can contact the playwright for an ending which updates BNITA ARYANT to DR. LAURA” (iv). Wilson’s note and willingness to revisit his text reflects an understanding that anti-gay sentiment and homophobic acts of violence are both persistent and cyclical. An examination of the play alongside the last thirty years of American politics only serves to emphasize the fact that though *The West Street Gang* offers some valuable solutions to hate crimes, clearly it is not the solution itself.

Lesbians Who Kill

Lesbians Who Kill, Deb Margolin, Peggy Shaw, and Lois Weaver’s 1992 play, stages the political, emotional, and erotic efficacy of responding to oppression with violence. May, played by Weaver, and June, played by Shaw, spend the majority of the play in a car parked in their front yard during a lightning storm. To pass the time, they act out or lip synch dialogue and songs taken from film noir movies; they play word games that help explore the difference between seeming and being; they have sex; and they attempt to parse the role of violence in their own relationship and in their interactions with men. May and June imagine acts of violence as a means of survival, as doing so allows them to understand and assert some control over a society that seeks daily to enact violence against them. Throughout the play, a newscaster’s voice on the radio announces updates on a string of murders of middle class white-men thought to be perpetrated by two women. May and June’s relationship to these killers is ambiguous; did they, would they, or will they kill all of these men? *Lesbians Who Kill* celebrates the permeability of imagined violence and real violence, and allows both its characters and its audience to dream of rage and resistance against homophobes and misogynists.

In her preface to *Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/Feminist Performance*, Sue- Ellen Case writes, “The current attacks by fundamentalist Christian organizations, neo-nazis, and the new right continue to threaten and harass lesbians, creating paranoia (or justified fear), closeted behavior, and feelings of violence. The later plays of *Split Britches*, *Lesbians Who Kill* and *Lust and Comfort*, effectively stage these dark times and their pernicious effects” (16). Though May and June isolate themselves from society and the raging storm in their car, such attacks from the outside world keep slipping in, both via radio announcements and May and June’s imaginations and memories. Rather than dramatize weak or passive characters, though, *Lesbians Who Kill* portrays characters who have had enough, and who refuse to shy away from frank discussions about the possibility that violence has for making their lives better. While Weaver and Shaw play the characters of May and June, they also always play themselves. They as much as admit to this when they reflect on the early stages of developing the play by assuming their characters in a piece of performative writing titled “May Interviews June,” published in the Fall 1991 *Movement Research* journal. In it, readers learn that the impetus for the piece came not only from Deb Margolin’s fascination with the real-life case of “lesbian serial killer” Aileen Wuornos, but also from a stunningly bad day on tour with a previous show, *Belle Reprieve*. June/Shaw reports:

After surviving the usual daily harassments, like groups of men on the street corner who need to comment on your hair and body parts, or overhearing a police officer referring to some unidentified woman as “that cunt,” we arrived at the theatre to find a difficult review of our work in the daily paper. [. . .] It was difficult because it was written from such an

openly misogynist point of view. [. . .] The women in the company decided to go out for a beer to commiserate the state of our sex in our society. We found ourselves in a bar that provided large screen video entertainment for the customers, featuring women being beaten, shot and tortured. We promptly left the bar only to find that all of our cars had been towed, not by the police, but by a local towing scam. When we protested that a \$200.00 towing charge was too much for parking five minutes in a shopping center parking lot, we were reprimanded for not behaving in a “lady-like manner.” It was at this moment that I announced to every man within ear-shot that the title of our next piece was going to be - - *Lesbians Who Kill!* (4)

June/Shaw’s outburst wasn’t a reaction to a small offense, but rather, an explosion of pent-up rage stemming from a lifetime’s accumulation of sexist and homophobic remarks and events. Pushed to the breaking point, her speech-act actually threatens a piece of theatre that itself is about the threat of violence. “May Interviews June” not only functions as a preview for the play, which opened the following spring at LaMama Theatre in New York City, but also succeeds in further muddying the line between characters and performers. By locating May and June as performers in *Belle Reprieve* and as present during the gestation of *Lesbians Who Kill*, Weaver and Shaw position May and June as parts of themselves – dangerous personas fed up with daily abuses who are willing to embrace the possibilities that retaliation and even murder have to offer. When May/Weaver asks in the interview if the play advocates violence towards men, June/Shaw responds, “Advocating violence? I guess it advocates images of violent

women or women expressing violence. We're usually afraid and embarrassed for women criminals, for in the end they seem to do little harm. I want to see women who can do some harm. I'd like to be dangerous, a potential threat" (4). *Lesbians Who Kill* thus allows May/Weaver and June/Shaw to exercise and dramatize their own complex relationship to violence, as well as to demonstrate the threat of violence that all women can employ.

One of the few narrative through-lines in the play's non-linear structure is a series of radio announcements that interrupt May and June's dialogue and provide updates on a series of murders taking place in the area. As the play begins, May and June are revealed in their car, lip-synching to the dialogue of an old film noir movie, during which May pulls a gun and pantomimes shooting June. Immediately afterwards, a voice on the radio notes,

Someone sinister may be at work on the highways of North Florida. So far the trail is eight victims long, each signpost along the way a bullet-riddled body of a middle-aged white man. A Citrus County man, missing since June, might be victim number nine. Investigators are looking for two women seen driving the missing man's car. (186)

In addition to alerting the general public to the threat of two female killers on the loose, this announcement, immediately following May and June's play-acting of violence, signals that May and June might be just replaying violent acts they've already committed and that they are rehearsing for their next killing. In the scene following this first radio announcement, May states, "You can want to kill somebody. [. . .] You can murder someone in your thoughts, you can murder someone just because of who they are. [. . .]

I'm a murderer" (188). After June mock-interrogates her, May reluctantly admits, "I didn't really kill anybody," which disappoints June: "I thought maybe you did." May explains, "I thought about it. I don't have an alibi. I can't account for my time, for my time during the murder" (189). Though May withdraws her claim to have killed someone, her possession of a gun, her desire to kill someone, her lack of an alibi, and the announced "on-the-loose" status of the killer renders her retraction questionable.

Throughout the rest of the play, announcements from the radio describe the rising body count, but always leave the killer or killers' identities ambiguous. Even the final radio announcement that proclaims that a suspect has been taken into custody, and that "residents now could rest easy" (216), provides little closure. Just because May and June aren't seen being dragged off to jail, their innocence or guilt remains unresolved. Time is fluid in *Lesbians Who Kill*; the radio announces murders and a criminal investigation that takes place over months, but May and June's scenes take place during just one thunderstorm. Rather than provide any answer to whether or not May and June committed the murders, the radio only serves to link them to the world outside of their car, and through describing aspects of Aileen Wuornos' story, to the real-world outside of the theatre. Her name is never mentioned in the play (though it is in "May Interviews June"), which effectively multiplies the possible sources of violence: May and June may or may not be the killers announced on the radio, who may or may not be Aileen Wuornos and her lover, Tyria Moore. Such a rhetorical turn positions Wuornos' murders not as the isolated acts of a lunatic, but rather, as an articulation of what can happen when any woman is pushed too far. In "May Interviews June," June/Shaw notes,

In our work in *Split Britches*, we've tried not to co-opt the experiences of others for political and theatrical effect. We look to where our own images and histories intersect with the issue and find our own impulses in that intersection. In other words, looking for our own desire and impulse to kill that comes from our own images of abuse in our daily lives. I guess we're looking for that moment where we all connect as the killer rather than killed. (4)

Margolin, Shaw, and Weaver's script does investigate the Wuornos killings and the resulting media sensationalism, but only in the abstract. *Lesbians Who Kill* resists the narrative closure of a typical "whodunit?" and instead asks could they – May, June, Wuornos, Moore, Weaver, Shaw, and all of the women both inside and outside of the theatre – have done it? The answer that *Split Britches* provides is an unqualified "yes." In performance, *Lesbians Who Kill* activates the threat of violence, and encourages the empowerment and identificatory pleasures that such a comparison to real-life serial killers allows.

Beyond killing time through fantasies of killing, May and June while away the minutes and hours of the storm by playing a game they call "Looks like/is like." In it, they exchange a series of words that leads them through a string of connotations: "Hummingbird. / Needle and thread. / Green lamé. / Electricity. / Precision. / Sudden chance. / Free will. / Peeing" (190-191). Lynda Hart, in her *Theatre Journal* review of the play, attempts to summarize the rules:

One of them names a key word, and diamond rings become halls of mirrors, ice, roller coasters, and crocodile eyes. Symbols don't count.

Their game is not based on a correspondence between signifier and signified. One only gets it “wrong” if the other can’t or won’t follow the association. Then an explanation can be called for, and the one who understands it loses. Winning means accepting failure, so the game can be renewed. There are no true or false answers, just anticipations of moments of misrecognition. (515)

Clearly, this is no ordinary travel game, and even Hart’s expert analysis (which she revisits as central to her conclusion of *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression*) points to the game’s complexity, if not impenetrability. Looks like/is like is May and June’s own language, one that they actively labor at throughout the play; their chains of associations build into a sensual patten, a rhythm that announces their commitment to one another and their desire to explore representation and reality together. Even when they’re not playing the game, their dialogue slips in and out of the same cadences: “Let’s murder him. / Kill him. / Lug wrench. / Jumper cables. / Battery. / Assault. / Distress. / Dismemberment” (203). For May and June, violence, or at least imagining violence, is both a game and a necessity – a way to cement their relationship and to navigate their surroundings. As June sleeps in the backseat, May continues to play “Looks like/is like” with herself, and one game slips into another:

Funny how one thing resembles another! I always found that funny! [. . .]
Guns! They look like the heads of greyhounds. That’s what guns are like!
That’s what they *look* like! Of course, I’m referring to the Ruger P90.45
caliber ACP. It’s compact and lightweight and has double action and it’s
stainless. Like me! Looks like. *Is* like! You see, my friend and I play a

game in the car on the Interstate! Yes a game! I love having a gun in my hand . . . instead of a slap in the face, you can give a little mortal love bite.

And victims never feel a bullet, have you heard that? (200)

May's conclusion that guns both look like and are like the heads of greyhounds parallels how May both looks like and is like someone who kills men on the highway. Within the play, the line between imaginary violence and real violence is always blurry; violence is a game that must be played and evaluated to approximate any meaning or to approach understanding.

In addition to "Looks like/is like," May and June also play at violence by performing excerpts from films like *The Grifters*, *Deception* and *Bonnie and Clyde*, as well as exploring film noir characters like the gruff police interrogator and the femme fatale. As May and June try on costumes for each of these roles, they are also trying on various relationships to violence. Hart writes in her review of *Lesbians Who Kill* that "May and June consider what options are open to them besides copying, how their consciousness can meet with the ones who did it, without becoming them" (517). May and June are picking the best parts of each of these films and roles in an effort to figure out which strategies and traits suit them best. Time and time again, their choices reflect the desire to become the killer rather than the killed – or at least, to look that way. Such play acting helps them explore the utility of the threat of violence in their own lives, and permits females in the audience to do the same. *Lesbians Who Kill* helps to reclaim and rejoice in the fallen woman and the femme fatale archetypes, and helps to revisit Wuornos' actions as resistance against individuals who were violent against her. In "Double Acts, Theatrical Couples, and Split Britches' 'Double Agency,'" Geraldine

Harris writes, “Playing out these games of fantasy, power, and seduction, Shaw and Weaver appear to create a circuit of desire between the characters/personas strong enough to spill out into the audience with physical force” (214). *Lesbians Who Kill* redefines the relationship between (lesbian) women and violence through such joyful and erotic identifications onstage and between the performers and the audience.

Split Britches’ design to empower women to rethink their relationship to violence is clarified in multiple sections of the play in which male members of the audience are threatened outright. May menaces the men in the audience with her gun: “All right, I want all the men in here to back up against the right side of the room” (210). Shortly afterwards, she moves out of her car and into the audience to address the “Boogie Man,” a hegemonic force, a sort of Everyman who thrives on fear and preys on women. She sings:

Your time is up, I’m warning you now

CROSS THE STREET

Don’t go out in the dark

Don’t jog in the park

Don’t fuck, don’t kiss

Don’t carry a gun

Unless you want it used against you

Unless you want it used against you

You motherfucking cocksucking piece of shit on the end of my boot!

(215)

As May moves into the personal space of any men who happen to be in the audience, she forcibly reminds them of the potential for women to become enraged, to be fed up from one sexist comment or wayward grope too many, and to retaliate as she is doing, and as Wuornos did. Reminiscent of the forceful presence of queer street patrols and the gun-savvy Pink Pistols, May's threat against the men in the audience gestures towards how all women might tap into their own May and June personas and fashion themselves into credible threats in the face of misogyny. *Lesbians Who Kill* is instructive: May and June end their final song and dance "with guns in each hand and pointing at the audience" (221), reminding the women in the audience to fight, to threaten, and to menace as necessary. In *Fatal Women*, Hart notes, "By the end of the performance, May and June have assembled quite an impressive collection of guns. They are prepared to use them, if necessary, to protect their love. Although they never emerge from the car, never enter into the storm shooting, the possibility remains tangible" (159). The threat of violence is central to both the narrative and the pedagogy of *Lesbians Who Kill*, and the play's lack of closure dramatizes in all its ambiguity the power that threat has to offer.

Such a threat will be necessary as long as queer relationships are read as an act of violence against heteronormative society. Yet despite the serious nature of the issues that the play raises, *Lesbians Who Kill* is a genuinely funny and moving play. Split Britches's use of the threat of violence is full of hope; it allows May and June to define and live their relationship on their own terms, even within what Hart calls "the impossible present tense" (*Fatal Women* 155). This moment that Hart describes is "impossible" both in the sense that the present is always fading into obscurity, and as of both 1992 and 2007, a time marked by ongoing heterosexism, homophobia, and extreme violence towards

women. Yet for May and June, using the threat of violence themselves and spreading its good word assures them that they'll be remembered:

June: We kiss for memory. We kiss before we fall into history.

May: We want to be remembered.

June: We kiss to be remembered . . . They'll remember us . . . they'll talk
about us . . . we're falling into history . . .

May: We're very tired . . .

June: Of course we are. But we're all jazzed up! (220)

Their mutual fighting against the "Boogie Man" keeps them together and keeps them energized. By slipping in and out of history, in and out of other peoples' stories, and in and out of each other's arms, May and June demonstrate the possibility of living hopefully in a hostile America while still working towards positive social change.

The final lines of *Lesbians Who Kill* feature June taking this discussion about violence directly to the audience. She says, "I'd love to watch her *really* kill somebody. Kill somebody by the railroad tracks in the wind while the trains went by, somebody with a beard of thorns and a crotch as hard and bitter as an unripe raspberry. Y'all know anybody like that?" (223). June's speech again explicitly celebrates the theme of the erotic potential of violence that is explored throughout *Lesbians Who Kill*. But her final question, "y'all know anybody like that?" is more difficult to assess; who is the "that" of the sentence? Is June asking the audience if they know "somebody" they want killed? Or does "that" modify "her" – is June asking if the audience has an object of desire that they want to watch do the killing? Or, could "that" reflect back on "I," on June herself, asking the audience if they know anyone who wants to watch someone do some killing?

Although the play encourages the audience to consider those who might be deserving of violence (“somebody”) outside the theatre, *Lesbians Who Kill*, as created and performed by Split Britches, also enables complex identificatory practices within the theatre.

The play’s original audience did know both the “her” and the “I” of the play; they knew May/Weaver and June/Shaw intimately, not just from this play, but from a long history of performances at La Mama Experimental Theatre Company (where *Lesbians Who Kill* was first staged) and the WOW Café (Women’s One World), both in Manhattan. Much critical work has been done about how all of Split Britches’ performances enabled their audiences to experience spectatorial pleasure in seeing their own feminist or lesbian desires embodied on stage.⁵⁵ *Lesbians Who Kill* productively pulls those erotic desires towards the violent, a journey that audiences were willing to take because of Weaver and Shaw’s performing bodies. Productions of the play with performers other than Weaver and Shaw and in venues other than La Mama and the WOW Café will need to work hard towards establishing such a community willing to identify with and desire alongside the characters, such that May and June’s exploration of the threat of violence can be more seductive than monstrous.

⁵⁵ See Sue-Ellen Case’s introduction (and bibliography) of *Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/Feminist Performance* for a survey of the enormous body of lesbian and feminist critical reception about Split Britches’ work. Scholarship about Split Britches by Case, Kate Davy, Jill Dolan, Lynda Hart, Vivian Patraka, Rebecca Schneider, and Alisa Solomon (and many others) has been foundational to the way that feminist and lesbian performance has been theorized in recent decades.

Conclusion / (re)staging the Threat of Queer Violence:

As activist groups and organizations well understand (or quickly discover), anti-gay violence is always located amidst a complicated nexus of issues and ideologies. In his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*, Michael Warner writes:

Every person who comes to a queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization is connected with gender, the family, notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and national fantasy, class identity, truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body. (xiii)

Warner rightly notes that prejudices against queer citizens are always about more than just sexual identity. It necessarily follows, then, that a diversity of responses to the problem of anti-gay violence are necessary – plural strategies of fighting (as Warner puts it) “locally and piecemeal” (xiii) to achieve social transformation. The mobilization of the threat of queer violence is just one such strategy, and it needs to continue to be carried out in diverse ways in response to a community’s specific needs by groups like queer street patrols and the many chapters of the Pink Pistols, as well as through daring theatrical representations that challenge and debate the ways that queers define themselves in relation to violence. In the final paragraphs of “Walking the City,” De Certeau describes that “[t]o practice space is thus to repeat the joyful and silent experience of childhood; it is, in a place, *to be other and to move toward the other*” (110). As these groups and individuals move through urban and rural spaces, as well as take to

stages and screens across the country, their embodied activism brings us all many footsteps closer to a safe existence.

*

Tension – Choreographers and actors enthusiastic about stage violence often rush into the fight itself – the spectacle is what they’ve trained for, after all – yet it’s the tense moment immediately before the fight that can be the most revelatory and productive. The value of the threat of queer violence can perhaps best be articulated onstage when the fight itself doesn’t happen, but rather, when one party backs down. Though Doric Wilson’s stage directions dictate that Lil fights Bnita, how much more instructive would the scene be if Lil’s verbal threats (along with a stern glare and a commanding wag of a well-manicured finger) cause Bnita to not engage in the fight at all? Many of the newspaper articles about queer street patrols describe moments where gay bashers, upon seeing ranks of uniformed and confident queers on patrol, turn and run. Let’s dramatize such tense encounters onstage, showing that victory can be had without the physical violence itself.

*

Pleasure – Those of us seeking to stage the threat of queer violence should also consider foregrounding the joys of bashing back, of demonstrating that wading into the fray can be fun. Representing characters who enjoy the literal fight gives credence to the notion that the figurative fight – that is, activism writ large – can be jubilant as well. When activism becomes dull, mundane, or otherwise equated with “work,” organizations (like many of the queer street patrols, and already, some chapters of the Pink Pistols) wink out of existence. In addition to the rage that so often accompanies staged violence (or queer activism, for that matter), we ought to highlight the humorous, erotic, and deeply

pleasurable nature of the threat of violence. Anger isn't enough; audiences need to see Lil relish preparing to kick Bnita's ass, and to see May getting off on menacing the men in the audience. Doing so encourages that the threat of violence even gets considered by queer audiences as a plausible strategy to begin with.

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Aftermath – How can the ephemeral leave traces? How can the intangible be made real? In performance, charting the affect of the threat of queer violence is crucial to a progressive project combatting anti-gay violence. Within the moments of fight choreography, it is difficult, though not impossible, to document the qualitative or quantitative change that the fight might later generate. Onstage, fight choreography is often over in a flash, and rarely is anything left behind to mark the event; furniture is often righted, blood mopped up, bodies dragged offstage. Yet this debris reminds audiences that the violent event happened, and that it was an important part of all that followed. Defunct activist groups like the Pink Panthers, the SFSP, and the Q-Patrol are remembered in part by the minutes of their meetings, their T-shirts, their flyers, their websites that are left running. Along these lines, what if May and June massed an entire arsenal of firearms over the course of the play? What if members of the West Street Gang had paint or chalk on their shoes so that by the play's end, the audience could see their footsteps across the city imprinted on the stage? The physical accumulation of an onstage archive of “stuff” during a fight can help make audiences understand that theatrical violence and its threat are more than just spectacle.

Conclusion: Toward A Theory of Staging Violence Queerly

LOUIS: Whatever comes, what you have to admire in Gorbachev, in the Russians is that they're making a leap into the unknown. You can't wait around for a theory. The sprawl of life, the weird . . .

HANNAH: Interconnectedness . . .

LOUIS: Yes.

BELIZE: Maybe the sheer size of the terrain.

LOUIS: It's all too much to be encompassed by a single theory now.

BELIZE: The world is faster than the mind.

LOUIS: That's what politics is. The world moving ahead. And only in politics does the miraculous occur.

BELIZE: But that's a theory.

HANNAH: You need an idea of the world to go out into the world. But it's the going into that makes the idea. You can't wait for a theory, but you have to have a theory.

Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: Perestroika*

At the close of *Perestroika*, the second play in Tony Kushner's epic two-play cycle *Angels in America*, the character Prior Walter steps to the foreground and hails the audience directly. His speech contains some of the most recognizable lines from the play – arguably, among the most memorable and powerful in the queer dramatic canon. He celebrates queer citizenship, offers hope in the midst of conservative climates and the ongoing AIDS crisis, and movingly blesses everyone onstage and off with “More life” (148). Prior's monologue continues over the above-cited discussion between Hannah, Belize, and Louis in the background, a less-often quoted and analyzed constituent of the play's conclusion. Like Prior, they also look toward the Millennium, and anticipate ways to negotiate politics and progress as the world spins ever forward. Importantly, Hannah articulates a Catch-22 of life: the paradoxical imperative to have a philosophy of how things operate before going out in the world, a theory that can only be arrived at from having already journeyed forth. Though Prior decides to “turn the volume down” (146) on this enigmatic conversation in favor of summarizing things plainly for the audience,

he too has wrestled with theory and will continue to do so as he goes on living. Despite the vastness of history, the spectre of violence, and the myriad challenges and oppressions that arise daily as a consequence of living in America, Kushner empowers us as the audience to go out in the world, to test our theories and have them transformed, and to go out in the world again.

At the close of this dissertation, I offer an auto-ethnographic account of one such adventure – a vexing but fruitful collision of theory and practice – my own work as the fight choreographer for a production of Laurie Brooks’s theatre-for-youth play *The Wrestling Season* (2000). I do so in order to reemphasize the tremendous stakes in staging violence, as well as to consider ways that the theatrical practice of fight choreography can be used to imagine new relationships between queerness and violence, to contribute to historical discourse, and to work critically towards social change. Though *The Wrestling Season* isn’t a play about queer history, *per se*, its portrayal of a queer bashing resonates with all of the plays I’ve examined in this project. I’ve ended each chapter of this dissertation with my theory of how the intersections of queerness and violence already in a play’s text might be productively revisited through non-realistic or counternormative choreographic and directorial interventions. Half-way through my research and contemplation on this dissertation, as I was still amassing the historical material and the analytical tools necessary to articulate such an aesthetic for staging queer violence, I was presented with the opportunity to take my theory out into the world. Like Hannah and the rest of *Perestroika*’s characters, my theory was changed in the process, just as I was.

Laurie Brooks's *The Wrestling Season* was published in the November 2000 issue of *American Theatre*, and the play has subsequently been performed at children's theatres and universities all around the country. In the preface to an interview with the playwright in *American Theatre*, Russell Scott Smith describes the play's significance and popularity: "As the frontiers of theatre for young people have expanded in recent years, traditional taboos have fallen quickly. [. . .] But one taboo has held fairly firm: sexuality. That changed last February when Kansas City's Coterie Theatre presented the premiere of *The Wrestling Season*" (46). Brooks's play is about eight high school students, all variously struggling with their identities and trying to cope with peer pressure. Matt, the play's protagonist, is on the school wrestling team, as is his best friend Luke. Jolt and Willy, two of their rivals on the team, spread the rumor that Matt and Luke are gay in an attempt to throw them off their games. Though Matt isn't actually questioning his own sexuality, Luke is unsure about his, producing a schism in their friendship. Matt tells his friend Kori that he isn't homophobic, that he doesn't "want to be hated for something" he's not, to which Kori responds, "Imagine what it would be like to be hated for something you are" (50). Throughout the play, Luke is on the receiving end of abuse, such as laughter and whispering in the hallway and someone writing "faggot" on his locker. Just before the school wrestle-offs, Luke is attacked by two unidentifiable assailants. He temporarily quits the wrestling team, but is encouraged by Matt to return. By play's end, Matt has bested his rivals on the team, patched up his friendship with Luke, and passed a pre-calculus test. Brooks intentionally leaves much ambiguous or unresolved, however, including Luke's sexuality, ostensibly as a way to prompt discussion within the play's target audience.

Upon my initial reading of the script, I had many reservations about the politics of the play, in particular the ways that it represented queer identities and anti-gay violence. Especially because of its place as one of the few theatre pieces for youth that even approached discussions of homosexuality, I was discouraged that it didn't do so in more assertive and productive ways. When asked by Smith about why she didn't make one of the characters "clearly gay and struggling with that," Brooks answered, "[B]ecause sexuality is not as clearly defined as we all would like it to be. It's very difficult to put labels on anybody. I'll admit that in early drafts, I tried it that way. But I didn't want this to be labeled the 'gay play.' My feeling is that it's about that and more" (46).

While I appreciated Brooks's unwillingness to have her drama ghettoized as solely about gay characters or themes, I was disheartened by the fact that her play has benefited from the publicity and cultural capital of such a label, without actually delivering much in the way of substance on queer identities or issues. Luke's ambiguous sexuality is more of a plot point than anything else; in that Matt's journey is the play's focus, *The Wrestling Season* reads not so much as about "how to figure out what it means to be gay," but rather, "how harmful it can be when someone thinks you're gay." Furthermore, reviewers rightly note that any nuanced analysis of the difficulties experienced by queer youth get lost amongst the many other issues that Brooks packs into her one-act play, such as teen pregnancy, date rape, eating disorders, and parental and academic pressures.⁵⁶ I feel that Brooks missed an opportunity to offer young audiences a positive image of homosexuality, if not a role model of sorts. Instead, Brooks has Matt encouraging Luke to return to the wrestling team and their friendship, claiming that "[t]he

rest of it doesn't matter" (56). Throughout this dissertation, I've argued nearly the opposite: representations of queer individuals and themes, especially as they intersect with violence, in fact matter very much, and those in the business of shaping such images ought to do so cautiously and critically.

My greatest objection to *The Wrestling Season* is the way that Brooks introduces a gay bashing against Luke into her narrative as a way of alerting self-indulgent Matt that others around him are hurting. I'm always sensitive to the possibility that dramatizing hate crimes can reemphasize stereotypes of gay (or potentially gay) characters as weak, helpless, victims, and I was dismayed to find that Brooks's stage directions for the scene left little room for resistant reading:

Lights dim to dappled night. Ensemble seems to disappear in darkness.

Luke enters onto the mat. He becomes aware that he is not alone. The first blow knocks him to the ground.

Luke: What... (*He shields his face*) No, don't!

He is overpowered and pummeled in the face and body. We do not see the attackers. We experience the assault through Luke's face and body movement. (55)

Brooks, at least, is playing with non-conventional methodologies for choreographing violence, but in absencing the aggressors from the fight, this scene plays into the victim-trope even more than does a realistic staging of a hate crime. With no visible attackers, there is no external signifier for why (or how) Luke is being beaten; all the audience has

⁵⁶ See John Garcia's *Talkin' Broadway* review and Elaine Liner's "Mat Finish."

to go on is the body of the actor playing Luke onstage, which could suggest to the audience that the violence results from who he is or what he has done. To make matters worse, when Luke returns for the wrestle-offs, he loses to Jolt, who then mocks him. Matt muscles in and grabs Jolt in a choke hold, shouting, “Look at him. Look at him! Do you know the guts it took for him to show up here?” (57). Though Luke had already claimed the moral victory for himself – “You won here today. And so did I” – Matt’s intervention again posits the (possibly) gay character’s inability to stand up for himself. True, Luke does show courage when he survives a hate crime, rejoins the wrestling team, and attempts to keep Matt from fighting with Jolt and getting disqualified. Yet I’m inclined to agree with voice teacher and performance scholar Bonnie Raphael, who writes in “Staged Violence – Greater than the Sum of its Parts” that “many audience members seem to be far more aware of what they see than of what they hear” (28). According to Brooks’s script, the audience hears a few characters articulating their acceptance of Luke, whatever his identity might be, but Luke’s (self) bashing, loss during the wrestle-off, and need to be defended by Matt (as well as the fact that he disappears from the remainder of the play’s narrative) visually reinforce Luke’s victim/loser status.

Despite my misgivings about the politics of the script, I was eager to work on the production, to try out my theories as a means of challenging normative assumptions and representations of queer identities. Nat Miller, an MFA student at the University of Texas at Austin (UT) in the Drama/Theatre for Youth program, asked me to serve as the fight choreographer for the show, a role which primarily involved staging Luke’s bashing scene and a few other small moments of violence. I arrived at a one-on-one production meeting with the director having read the script many times, eager to brainstorm how

choreography might speak in interesting ways to the themes that I felt Brooks was trying to convey. I began by suggesting that Luke's attackers be put on stage and Luke be removed, keeping the style of Brooks's stage directions intact while focusing on the senseless brutality of the violence itself. As a variant, I suggested that Luke be choreographed to "step out" of the fight and to watch as the attackers beat him (that is, where he had previously been standing), a staging that would gesture towards Luke's own witnessing of the violence being enacted upon his body. In doing so, the audience might feel more drawn in or unsettled by the violence, especially if they're watching it and experiencing it in the same way Luke is. I was curious why despite Brooks's stage directions at the beginning of the play – "*The ensemble functions as a chorus. [. . .] They remain present throughout the play, watching and commenting on the action*" (47) – the entire cast exits from the scene while Luke is beaten. I argued that keeping them onstage, and perhaps drawing them closer to the attack on Luke could be productive, demonstrating that as his rumor-spreading classmates and as a microcosm of society, they're all somehow complicit in the homophobic attack.

I also thought that if Brooks wanted to destabilize the way that violence is performed (by absenting the attackers), we might push the form even further. I recommended that instead of masking the stage combat apparatus – the techniques by which theatrical violence is made to pass as real – we expose it. I suggested that we not hide knaps (the sound effect meant to stand in for the noise of a punch or a slap, made surreptitiously by striking a part of the body or the clapping of one's hands when and where the audience can't see it); I also advised that we could allow the audience to see that most all fight choreography is done at a safe distance so that there is little chance that

the actors will actually hurt one another. I hypothesized to Nat that completely pulling the audience out of the realism of the fight would force them to think about the nature of the violence being staged; that is, some of them might be able to link the idea that all stage combat is a manipulation of the audience's perception and emotions, just as all real life violence is similarly carried out to exert control.

About thirty minutes into my tirade on the uses of resistant choreography within *The Wrestling Season*, Nat sheepishly admitted that we wouldn't be doing any of those things (though he appreciated and was intrigued by all of the possibilities). He explained that his advisor for the play was none other than Laurie Brooks, who was a guest faculty member for the semester, and that we would be carrying out her text and stage directions to the letter. That meant that the ensemble would disappear into the darkness during the scene, and that the first blow would indeed knock Luke to the ground. Disappointed to be reined in so utterly, I tried to make a case for at least letting Luke struggle a bit – he is a wrestler after all – before getting “overpowered.” The director stood firm, though, and so it fell to me to try to make the play's queer bashing work precisely as Brooks had laid it out.

Rehearsal for this particular moment of stage violence against a queer body was difficult, to say the least. Stage combat has always struck me as a strange practice – “playing” with violence to make meaning, if not provide a sort of spectacle-induced pleasure for audiences – but it wasn't until I began working on my own in a mirrored rehearsal studio on *The Wrestling Season's* choreography that I truly appreciated how downright bizarre the discipline can be. I watched myself in the mirror experimenting with different ways to be knocked to the ground, overpowered, and pummeled, and in

doing so, I took on both the role of Luke and the role of the actor playing Luke. I immediately experienced psychic discomfort in the ways that my own identity overlapped with Luke's, and I was briefly reminded of the ways that queer bodies are vulnerable, are always potential targets for violence. I also experienced great anxiety, fear really, on behalf of the actor telling this story. "Normal" staged violence is difficult enough to perform for an audience in any kind of credible way, and as I looked at my own reflection in the mirror, this theatrical moment seemed to me almost impossible to "sell." Though I continue to question the value of the scene within the play, in that instant, all I wanted to do was help the actor not look like a complete idiot alone on the stage.

Chance Propps, the brave undergraduate actor who had been given the role of Luke, did as well as one could with the severe constraints of Brooks's stage directions; he would later admit to me in a post-production interview that this scene was the hardest he had ever encountered in his acting career. During our first rehearsal, there were so many conversations that I wanted to have – to explain my distaste for the structure of the play or to discuss what it's like to be gay and to feel the need to constantly fight against feeling vulnerable or like a victim. I didn't want to presume any sort of intimacy, especially as I had just met Chance and his sexuality was for me (like Luke's in the play) still ambiguous. In retrospect, I wish I would have done more table-work with him on the scene, perhaps given him the sort of dramaturgical tools to think through what goes on in the mind of someone who is gay-bashed. Instead, however, I admit that I bowed to the exigencies of a short rehearsal process which dictated that we dive right into the staging of this challenging moment.

To make the story of the fight clear for Chance, I fully choreographed the scene as if three people would actually be performing it. During the first rehearsal, another cast member and I stepped into the roles of the (soon to be invisible) attackers, such that Chance could learn the logic and the physics of the fight – why Luke’s body would be driven to the ground, why he would protect his face, and so forth. Even though we took the rehearsal slow, it was still intense, a charged and emotional process for all of us. Chance admitted that he had never been in a fight before, either onstage or in life, and was overwhelmed with how affected he was viscerally by the nature of it all. This was useful, of course – precisely the sort of experience and emotion that he would need to draw upon in performance – but also unsettling for me as a fight choreographer and a gay man. In the service of the play, I was calculatedly (though carefully) inflicting trauma; I was putting this actor in the role of a victim, and moreover, I was momentarily stepping into the role of the aggressor. All of this was deeply disconcerting for me, especially as I had recently rehearsed Luke’s side of the violence, and because I knew that the possibility existed that my own queer body could be forced into such a position as the real-life victim of anti-gay violence at any time.

After the first rehearsal, I subtracted the attackers from the equation, and Chance began the unwieldy task of telling the story of both sides of the bashing for both himself and the audience. In addition to offering advice for how to use his voice and his body to better portray the violence, I found that my greatest responsibility as fight choreographer was managing Chance’s morale. He was incredibly hard on himself during the rehearsal process, growing upset when he didn’t feel he was progressing quickly enough or performing up to his own rigorous standards. This fact probably wasn’t helped by the

director's shorthand for the scene; whenever it was time to rehearse this moment, Nat would jokingly call out "Chance, time to beat yourself up." Unfortunately, beating himself up was exactly what Chance was doing, largely because of the demanding way that Brooks's stage directions configured this particular gay bashing.

Not un-problematically, Chance was replicating his character's sense of self-loathing within the play. Luke blames himself and then withdraws from his friends because of his own unease about his sexual identity: "Do you think all this would have happened if we weren't friends? [. . .] They got me pegged. Pinned. Figured out. I'm a freak. And everybody knows it" (56). The director repeatedly insisted that Luke be portrayed as a strong character (in as far as Brooks's stage directions allowed), and Chance would much later confess that "it was a challenge taking this character who has all these issues and keeping the character strong and resilient, especially when bad things keep happening to him." Despite the challenges of the text and of the rehearsal process, Chance performed beautifully, eventually conveying the sense of this gay bashing as best as anyone could, given the constraints of the production. Though the style of the scene as laid out by Brooks never worked for me (especially as one of the few diversions from realism in the whole production), Chance and Nat were ecstatic about the final product, and Chance described that it was a positive experience all in all, his "favorite project to have ever worked on."

One of the most remarked on features of *The Wrestling Season* is the innovative post-show forum designed by Brooks to foster open dialogue with the audience. In "Put a Little Boal in Your Talkback," Brooks encourages theatre practitioners to "move talkbacks beyond banality to deep engagement" (60). To that end, she recommends that

The Wrestling Season immediately be followed by a Boal-inspired talkback in which the actors return to the stage and remain in character, as a facilitator guides the audience through a set of exercises designed to “extend the life of the performance, build and transform community and create a space where diverse opinions can be exchanged and explored” (Brooks “After-Play”). One of the final steps in the process allows audience members to interact directly with the characters in the play, sharing “sentences or phrases of comfort, advice, affirmation or counsel” (*The Wrestling Season* 59). I admit that during the UT production, this strategy permitted some genuinely lovely moments of audience engagement and critical thinking. On the night that I attended the play, for instance, someone stood up and reminded the characters, many of whom had said and done horrible things during the course of the play, that “who they are in high school is not who they have to be for the rest of their lives.” Yet the discussions that the audience was willing to have were cautious; many people seemed reluctant to discuss the characters or their actions when the characters were still in their presence. Moreover, the prescribed ambiguity of Luke’s sexuality and the concealed identity of his attackers generally prevented the audience from taking up the issue of the play’s hate crime, if for no other reason than they weren’t sure what had happened, who was involved, or how to label it. Though like Brooks, I too am weary of audience questions in talkbacks that fail to delve much deeper than “isn’t it difficult to learn all those lines?” I found her post performance forum to be so dictatorial as to shut down certain discussions that the play’s themes might have generated. In particular, I felt that Brooks had once again robbed Chance of any agency as an actor. Despite his excellent work in an unrewarding role and on a maddeningly difficult fight scene, Chance had no opportunity to describe his own process

to the audience, nor were they allowed to ask. For me, the talkback registered as just another missed opportunity among many in *The Wrestling Season*.

If nothing else, my work on *The Wrestling Season* proved instructive about the shortcomings of my dramaturgical ethos for staging queer violence – that is, that the theory for resistant choreography that I’ve articulated throughout this dissertation can itself be resisted. Within the theatre, the fight choreographer is just one voice among many, and often has to clamor to be heard above the din. Ultimately, any staging of violence has to support a director’s concept for a given production. Given that many of the techniques that I’ve suggested reorder a play’s priorities to speak to the intersections of queer identity, history, and violence, I (now) understand that few of these techniques are likely to be received enthusiastically by a director, especially if the fight choreographer is brought in after the initial production meetings, as is so often the case. Needless to say, fight choreographers invested in such a project need to be bold, continue to take risks both in production meetings and in rehearsals, and keep forging alliances with directors who might be prone to explore such world-making possibilities.

Playwrights and producers can and should be courted as well. Especially in an increasingly guarded and litigious society, playwrights (via their agents) have exerted more and more control over what can be done with a play. Literary argents like Samuel French and Dramatists Play Service exact stiff penalties (including the cancellation of a production) for straying too far from what a playwright stipulates in a script. Though much of this dissertation has argued the need to try to recuperate plays that are already in front of us (such as *The Wrestling Season*), I also believe that fight choreographers and those dedicated to the cause of altering the nature and frequency of violence in queer

lives should engage playwrights in critical dialogue before the plays are written. Boundaries need to be pushed where they can, and that often means finding an institutional home for this kind of activist undertaking. Unfortunately, profit margins and subscriptions might dictate what can and can't be done at regional companies and on Broadway, and actor-training often takes precedence over imagination or exploration in University theatre programs. One of the reasons I was so disappointed with the UT production of *The Wrestling Season*, I think, was that it had a place in the (perhaps misnamed) Laboratory Theatre building and "Laboratory Theatre Season," and yet no such process of experimentation or innovation was valued. Still, I believe that there are audiences ready for these ideas, just as there are practitioners out there who are willing to explore them.

All of these complexities of real world theatrical systems of power, as well as the inapplicability of all of my choreographic interventions with regard to *The Wrestling Season*, have caused me to revisit my theories about (re)staging queer violence while I've been writing this dissertation. Though I remain resolute that positive, challenging, and progressive representations of queer violence can and must be enacted onstage, this enterprise has renewed my faith in the space and freedom that academic discourse permits. I tend to agree with the late poet and activist David Wojnarowicz when he writes in *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* that "[o]ne of the last frontiers left for the radical gesture is the imagination" (120). Throughout this dissertation I've offered up a methodology for using the performance of queer violence as a radical (re)imagining that can lead to new understandings of history, new perceptions of contemporary identities, and new visions for queer futurity. Though these resistant

choreographies would touch many lives when enacted onstage (or, dare I dream, a Hollywood blockbuster?), they also have immeasurable value when imagined on the page. These written declarations of how we would choreograph things if given the opportunity serve as manifestoes for what might be, prompting discourse and kick-starting others' imaginations and activist practices. Just as Jonathan Rauch was flattered that his "Pink Pistols" fantasy on *Salon.com* was realized by Doug Krick, I'd be overjoyed if my dream of a sensible staging of *The Wrestling Season* were to be carried out by someone with the means and the resources. And even if my choreography isn't destined to be, I rest content knowing that my critical thinking about a certain moment of queerness and violence is in circulation, and might through some act of interconnectedness energize playwrights, practitioners, or even politicians to make change however they're able.

None of this activist labor is easy, of course, nor should it be, either onstage or in the streets. In addition to the continuation and proliferation of what might be termed reductive representations of queerness and violence, resurgences of conservatism and ongoing hate crimes do much to discourage such radical gestures. Yet as Louis describes in *Perestroika*, there is a sort of political "miraculous" just waiting to be uncovered in history or witnessed in the present; resistance is all around us. Notwithstanding my own quarrels with *The Wrestling Season*, three such moments of dynamic resistance surrounding (or as a result of) the production inspired me.

I learned about the first act of resistance when I interviewed Chance nine months after the production. He confessed to me that the short rehearsal period and the director's nervousness about having the playwright as his advisor led to a tense rehearsal process

that emphasized line readings and blocking rather than character development or any serious consideration of the play's numerous themes. Chance, along with Phillip Taylor and Shannon Silber (who played Matt and Kori, respectively) convened a sort of *ad hoc* study club in their dormitory rooms for the duration of the production; the three would rehearse their scenes from the play, discuss how best to approach their characters in performance, and debate issues that the play brought up. Chance, Phillip, and Shannon constituted, however briefly, a resistant and critically engaged community, unwilling to be lax about the politics and practice of representing queer identities and violence.

The second act of resistance took place during one of the production's post performance forums. Perhaps sensing that none of the characters in the play were likely to provide any of the young queers in the audience with much hope, one man sitting toward the back of the house stood up and offered support where the play did not. As required by the structure of Brooks's talkback, he channeled his encouragement to the audience through advice to one of the characters. He told Luke, "I'm a gay male, and I know how you feel – I got beat up in high school for being gay. Stick in there." In outing himself to a theatre full of strangers, he risked a reprisal of violence against himself in order that he could offer himself up as a role-model both for Luke and for members of the audience. In a very utopic moment, he became the positive image of homosexuality that the play so disturbingly lacked.

The day after a frustrating rehearsal in which I had repeatedly questioned my own worth as a choreographer and scholar-practitioner, I glimpsed a third act of resistance: Chance and Phillip walking together across campus. Something about what would ordinarily have been a very mundane public sighting gave me pause. Upon closer look,

Chance and Phil were walking literally shoulder to shoulder, as if they were trying to eradicate any space between them. Such an intimacy violated just about every heterosexual male code I had ever been taught by society, and I briefly experienced a flash of panic on their behalf. Though their sexualities remained undefined for me, I worried even about the surveillance and policing of their visible homosocial affection. Inexplicably, my uneasiness passed, and was suddenly replaced with an incredible (and almost spiritual) hope for the two of them, a sense that after finding one another (in whatever sense) they'd be all right. In Prior's final monologue, he expresses that "the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away" (148). In that moment of witnessing Chance and Phillip's defiant pedestrian act in the middle of a busy campus of a university in the middle of Texas, I was reminded of the courage, the style, the fighting, the sacrifice, and the faith of so many others: of Prior, of Harvey and of Matthew, of the Pink Panthers and the Pink Pistols, of Joshua, of Lois and Peggy and May and June, of Marsha P. Johnson, of Shanghai Lil, of Joan Nestle and John D'Emilio, of the veterans of Stonewall (and those who claim to be) of every gender and race and class and shape and size, of Romaine and Judy and Dennis, of Brandon Teena, and of those that Tina Landau calls "the masses, the silent, the All" (55).

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