

1 MELANCHOLIA AND MORALISM: AN INTRODUCTION

*Nothing could be more irresponsible than the
immodest self-certainty of one who rests content in
the good sense of a responsibility properly assumed.*

—Thomas Keenan, *Fables of Responsibility*

At the opening plenary of the thirteenth International AIDS Conference, held in Durban during July 2000, Edwin Cameron, gay, HIV-positive, and a justice of the High Court of South Africa, gave the first Jonathan Mann Memorial Lecture. His was perhaps the most impassioned and eloquent statement of what became the central theme of the conference: the glaring inequity whereby the lucky few can afford to buy their health while the unlucky many die of AIDS. “I exist as a living embodiment of the iniquity of drug availability and access,” Cameron said. “Amid the poverty of Africa, I stand before you because I am able to purchase health and vigor. I am here because I can afford to pay for life itself.” He went on to compare this injustice to the worst inhumanities of modern times:

It is often a source of puzzled reflection how ordinary Germans could have tolerated the moral iniquity that was Nazism, or how white South Africans could have countenanced the evils that apartheid inflicted, to their benefit, on the majority of their fellows. . . . [But] those of us who lead affluent lives, well-attended by medical care and treatment, should not ask how Germans or white South Africans could tolerate living in proximity to moral evil. We do so ourselves today, in proximity to the impending illness and death of many millions of people with AIDS. This will happen, unless we change the present. It will happen because available treatments are denied to those who need them for the sake of aggregating corporate wealth for shareholders who by African standards are already unimaginably affluent.¹

Just three months after Cameron’s speech resounded around the world, Andrew Sullivan, gay, HIV-positive, and a contributing writer for the *New York Times Magazine*, wrote a short opinion column for the magazine entitled “Pro Pharma.” “Because I have H.I.V.,” he said, “I swallow around 800 pills of prescription drugs a month. . . . I asked my pharmacist the other day to tote up the annual bill (which my insurance mercifully pays): \$15,600, easily more than I pay separately for housing, food,

1. Edwin Cameron, “The Deafening Silence of AIDS,” *Health and Human Rights* 5, no. 1 (2000).

travel, or clothes.”² After several paragraphs detailing Americans’ expanding use of pharmaceutical products and their growing complaints about the price they pay for them, followed by a defense of profit-driven drug development, Sullivan ended with these lines: “The private sector is now responsible for more than 70 percent of all the pharmaceutical research in this country—and that share is growing. Whether we like it or not, these private entities have our lives in their hands. And we can either be grown-ups and acknowledge this or be infantile and scapegoat them. . . . They’re entrepreneurs trying to make money by saving lives. By and large, they succeed in both. Every morning I wake up and feel fine, I’m thankful that they do.”³

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Edwin Cameron had presented a stark moral dilemma. How can we tolerate a situation in which our lives and prosperity are purchased at the price of the deaths of many millions of others throughout the world? Andrew Sullivan resolves that dilemma very simply: This is reality, and we can either be grown-ups and accept it or we can be infantile and oppose it. I need hardly say that Sullivan’s view is breathtaking in its flippancy both in its disregard of others’ lives and in taking for granted his own privilege to “feel fine.”⁴ But I am also aware that I have produced an easy effect with my juxtaposition of these two statements: absolute certainty about the moral superiority of Cameron’s humble, humane attitude as against Sullivan’s callous rationalization of his own entitlement. In doing so, I worry that I reproduce Sullivan’s own moral certitude and thus engage in the very moralism that I consider the greatest danger of Sullivan’s position. Sullivan’s self-assurance about the maturity and righteousness of his opinions is no doubt what allows him to adopt such a glib tone in the first place, and it is that tone that most determines that his argument will give offense. But giving offense would also appear to be just what Sullivan is up to. There can be little question but that he knew at the time of writing “Pro Pharma” the political stir Cameron’s

2. Andrew Sullivan, “Pro Pharma,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 29, 2000, p. 21.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

4. Sullivan so takes his privilege for granted that he adds as a parenthesis only the note about having insurance that “mercifully” pays the exorbitant cost of his medications.

speech had caused. I therefore assume that Sullivan's intention in writing his opinion piece was to play the bad boy, to provoke outrage among all those "politically correct" activists he so loves to castigate for immaturity.⁵ "Grow up," Sullivan scolds, again and again.

Sullivan's equation of maturity with his own conservative sexual politics and infantilism with what he calls liberation politics is consistently produced through a narrative about AIDS and gay men.⁶ That narrative goes like this: Prior to AIDS, gay men were frivolous pleasure-seekers who shirked the responsibility that comes with normal adulthood—settling down with a mate, raising children, being an upstanding member of society. Gay men only wanted to fuck (and take drugs and stay out

5. Why the *New York Times Magazine* indulges Sullivan's political whims is another question. "Pro Pharma" followed by several months Sullivan's feature-story paean to getting juiced on testosterone ("The He Hormone," *New York Times Magazine*, April 2, 2000). Eventually the *Magazine* did appear to signal some regret about Sullivan's shilling for the pharmaceutical companies in its pages. Two pieces published in early 2001 were highly critical of the industry. See Tina Rosenberg, "Look at Brazil," *New York Times Magazine*, January 28, 2001 (a report on the viability of generic AIDS medications in stemming the epidemic in developing countries, and on the pharmaceutical industry's callous opposition to their manufacture and distribution); and Stephen S. Hall, "Prescription for Profit," *New York Times Magazine*, March 11, 2001 (an investigation into how a virtually useless allergy medication was turned into a blockbuster drug). An op-ed piece by Anthony Lewis taking the Tina Rosenberg article as its point of departure for criticizing the Bush administration ("Bush and AIDS," *New York Times*, February 3, 2001, p. A13) led Sullivan to write yet another column exonerating the pharmaceutical industry in the *New Republic*. Sullivan's "argument" is the now familiar Republican one that free enterprise will solve all of our problems: "The reason we have a treatment for HIV is not the angelic brilliance of anyone per se but the free-market system that rewards serious research with serious money. . . . Drug companies, after all, are not designed to cure diseases or please op-ed columnists. They're designed to satisfy shareholders" (Andrew Sullivan, "Profit of Doom?" *New Republic*, March 26, 2001, p. 6).

6. Sullivan's arguments against "the liberationists" appear in his *Virtually Normal: An Argument about Homosexuality* (New York, Vintage, 1996). Sullivan sometimes calls himself a liberal, and indeed many of his views are among those that make classical liberalism so problematic. He nevertheless boasted in the pages of the *New York Times* of voting in the 2000 presidential election for George W. Bush, hardly a standard-bearer for liberalism. On the right-wing politics of the current crop of mainstream gay journalists, including Sullivan, see Michael Warner, "Media Gays: A New Stone Wall," *Nation*, July 14, 1997, pp. 15–19.

all night and dance), and at that to fuck the way naughty teenage boys want to fuck—with anyone attractive to them, anytime, anywhere, no strings attached. Then came AIDS. AIDS made gay men grow up. They had to find meaning in life beyond the pleasure of the moment. They had to face the fact that fucking has consequences. They had to deal with real life, which means growing old and dying. So they became responsible. And then everyone else accepted gay men. It turns out that the only reason gay men were shunned was that they were frivolous pleasure-seekers who shirked responsibility. Thank God for AIDS. AIDS saved gay men.

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For my argument in this book, there is particular significance in the fact that this narrative structures Sullivan's notorious *New York Times Magazine* cover story "When Plagues End: Notes on the Twilight of an Epidemic," published in November 1996.⁷ In the opening of that essay, Sullivan claims that even recognizing the end of AIDS is something many gay men can't do, so wedded are we to our infantile rebelliousness, recently embodied in AIDS activism. He gives proof of just how extreme such attachments are by writing about "a longtime AIDS advocate" responding to the promising outlook for people with HIV disease brought about by a new generation of anti-retroviral drugs: "It must be hard to find out you're positive now,' he had said darkly, 'It's like you really missed the party.'" That "darkly" suggests Sullivan's relish of what he assumes his readers will understand as the perversity that attends such childish liberation politics as AIDS activism.⁸

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7. Andrew Sullivan, "When Plagues End: Notes on the Twilight of an Epidemic," *New York Times Magazine*, November 10, 1996, pp. 52–62, 76–77, 84.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 55. It occurs to me that Sullivan's friend might have meant something quite different from the spin Sullivan puts on his remark by inserting "he had said darkly." Learning that you're HIV-positive after the demise of AIDS activism and the general sense of urgency about AIDS, even within the gay community in the United States, could indeed make you feel that you'd missed the party—if by "party" you mean a system of support and a sense of community based on general agreement that the epidemic constitutes a crisis.

Here is a portion of the “AIDS=maturity” story that Sullivan tells in “When Plagues End”:

*Before AIDS, gay life—rightly or wrongly—was identified with freedom from responsibility, rather than with its opposite. Gay liberation was most commonly understood as liberation from the constraints of traditional norms, almost a dispensation that permitted homosexuals the absence of responsibility in return for an acquiescence in second-class citizenship. This was the Faustian bargain of the pre-AIDS closet: straights gave homosexuals a certain amount of freedom; in return, homosexuals gave away their self-respect. But with AIDS, responsibility became a central, imposing feature of gay life. . . . People who thought they didn't care for one another found that they could. Relationships that had no social support were found to be as strong as any heterosexual marriage. Men who had long since got used to throwing their own lives away were confronted with the possibility that they actually did care about themselves. . . .*⁹

Although Sullivan might believe he is telling an uplifting story about gay men's commendable progress, in doing so, he represents gay men before AIDS as the most odious sort of creatures—men who were all too willing to bargain away self-respect and respect for others to gain a form of freedom that was no more than *freedom from* obligation. For those of us whose prime spanned roughly the years between Stonewall and the onset of the epidemic (these were the years of my mid-twenties to mid-thirties; they were also, of course, the years of the greatest growth of the lesbian and gay movement and of the greatest development of lesbian and gay culture in the United States), it is deeply insulting to read of ourselves as having been closeted, accepted second-class citizenship, cared little for ourselves or one another, had no idea we could form strong relationships, thrown our lives away.¹⁰ But this is what it is to be recruited as the foil of someone's moralistic narrative.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 61–62.

10. In the expanded version of “When Plagues End” published as a chapter of his *Love Undetectable: Notes on Friendship, Sex, and Survival* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf,

I will return to Sullivan's notion of this "Faustian bargain," because I am interested in its reappearance as an explanation of how he became infected with HIV. For the moment, however, I want to look at the second part of his AIDS=maturity narrative, the part about society's newfound acceptance of gay men. "AIDS has dramatically altered the psychological structure of homophobia," Sullivan writes. "What had once been a strong fear of homosexual difference, disguising a mostly silent awareness of homosexual humanity, became the opposite. The humanity slowly trumped the difference. Death, it turned out, was a powerfully universalizing experience."¹¹ Amazingly, in Sullivan's account, it takes only the recognition that homosexuals die for the homophobe to get in touch with his suppressed feelings for our humanity. More amazing still, homophobia was not really hatred at all, just a pretense of hatred. The fear of difference, in the end, has no psychic reality.¹² It can thus easily be "trumped" by that magical equalizer on which liberalism always stakes its bet: the universal.

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Sullivan's reliance on magical thinking to vanquish both homophobia and AIDS is not, however, a species of optimism; on the contrary, it is mere wish-fulfillment. The continuing presence of illness and death from AIDS throughout the world and in our own lives is, for Sullivan, as it is for much of American society, so repressed that every fact attesting to that continued presence is denied either reality or significance. Moreover, anyone who protests that the AIDS crisis is far from over incurs Sullivan's rebuke. We cling to AIDS as melancholiacs unable to mourn our losses and get on with the business of living, and living now in the

1998), we learn that it was in fact Sullivan himself who conformed to his description of pre-AIDS gay men. He was closeted, had little self-respect, had no idea that gay men could form sustaining relationships. Thus his characterization is a classic case of projection of a hated portion of himself onto others.

11. Sullivan, "When Plagues End," p. 56.

12. This might explain why Sullivan is so hostile toward, or at the very least uncomprehending of, queer theory, which has developed such an acute understanding of the intractable psychosexual mechanisms of homophobia. Among queer theory's insights about homophobia is that what appears to be the acceptance of gay men during the AIDS epidemic is in fact the acceptance—not to say the welcoming—of the mass death of gay men; see "The Spectacle of Mourning," this volume.

world of normal grown-up responsibilities and genuine freedom—freedom from homophobic disapproval. But my argument would reverse the charge. It is Sullivan’s view that is melancholic, and his moralism is its clearest symptom. Sullivan is incapable of recognizing the intractability of homophobia because his melancholia consists precisely in his identification with the homophobe’s repudiation of him.¹³ And his moralism reproduces that repudiation by projecting it onto other gay men in whom he disavows seeing himself. But what I am saying here is not meant to diagnose Sullivan. Rather I am attempting to explain a widespread psychosocial response to the ongoing crisis of AIDS.

It would not surprise anyone if I claimed that AIDS gave dangerous new life to moralism in American culture. But that is not exactly my claim. Although much of my writing about AIDS endeavors to combat moralistic responses to the epidemic, especially as those responses have had murderous consequences, my writing also seeks to understand the moralism adopted by the very people initially most devastated by AIDS in the United States: gay men. I am concerned, in other words, with a particular relation between devastation and self-abasement, between melancholia and moralism, between the turn away from AIDS and the turn toward conservative gay politics.

The turn away from AIDS is no simple matter. No one decided one day, enough of AIDS—and then wrote an essay called “When Plagues End.” Nor did the turn away from AIDS come about as late as 1996, when Sullivan wrote his essay in the *New York Times* responding to the promise of protease inhibitors.¹⁴ On the one hand, the turn away from AIDS can

13. Freud proposes that melancholia is the result of identification with and incorporation of the love object who has rejected the melancholiac. The repudiation of the self thus becomes a part of one’s own ego, resulting in a moralistic self-abasement. See Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), vol. 14, pp. 237–258. See also “Mourning and Militancy,” this volume.

14. Whereas many people would locate the origin of the current lack of attention to AIDS in the United States in the widespread changes brought about by the use of second-generation anti-retroviral medication—protease inhibitors and non-nucleoside analogue reverse transcriptase inhibitors—my essays locate that origin in problems

be seen as one response to the epidemic from the moment it was recognized in 1981. Whether as denial that it was really happening, that it was happening *here*, that it was happening to people *like us*, or as denial of its gravity and scope, the fearsomeness of AIDS always induced this tendency to disavowal. On the other hand, those who did confront AIDS as a crisis, often because they had little or no choice to do otherwise, were often eventually overwhelmed by the enormity and persistence of the tragedy, and they too sought the ostensible relief of turning away. But this second turning away is more complicated than the first. The first entails phobic denial—“this isn’t happening”; “this can’t affect me”; “I have nothing in common with those people.” The second involves too much loss—“I can no longer bear this.” If, in this latter case, relief seems possible, who wouldn’t grasp it? The denial in this case is less of the actuality of AIDS itself than of the overwhelming effects of cumulative loss. This, too, might be characterized as melancholia.

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I have claimed that Andrew Sullivan’s moralistic repudiation of gay men in the pre-AIDS years is a symptom of melancholia, but I have now admitted that the denial of loss can produce melancholia too. What are its symptoms, if not moralism? How do these forms of melancholia differ?

Andrew Sullivan’s proclamation of the end of AIDS was diagnosed as fetishistic by Phillip Brian Harper in a trenchant critique of “When Plagues End.” Using the classic psychoanalytic formula for fetishism—“I know very well, but all the same . . .” (thus, an avowal that is simultaneously a disavowal)—Harper translates Sullivan’s obliviousness to the millions for whom the development of protease inhibitors clearly can-

already faced by AIDS activists at least five years before these drugs came on the market. See especially “Mourning and Militancy” in this volume. Sullivan had written a preliminary version of “When Plagues End” as an op-ed piece in the *Times* a year earlier (“Fighting the Death Sentence,” *New York Times*, November 21, 1995, p. A21). During the ensuing year, the media was full of “good news” about a turnaround in the epidemic, culminating with *Time* magazine’s making AIDS researcher David Ho its 1996 person of the year. Ho was at that time theorizing and clinically testing the possibility of eliminating HIV entirely from the bodies of people who began combination therapy immediately following seroconversion. He soon had to admit that his theory was overly optimistic.

not mean the “plague’s end” as “I know that not all people who have AIDS are U.S. whites, but in my narrative they are.” Harper explains:

If Sullivan can suggest that “most people in the middle of this plague” experience the development of protease inhibitors as a profound occurrence (indeed as the “end” of AIDS) while he simultaneously admits that “the vast majority of H.I.V.-positive people in the world”—manifest in the United States principally as blacks and Latinos—will not have access to the new drugs and, indeed, will likely die, what can this mean but that, in Sullivan’s conception, “most people in the middle of this plague” are not non-white or non-U.S. residents? Thus, while it may be strictly true that, as Sullivan puts it, his words are not “meant to deny” the fact of continued AIDS-related death, the form that his declaration assumes does constitute a disavowal—not of death per se but of the significance of the deaths of those not included in his notion of racial-national normativity. Those deaths still occur in the scenario that Sullivan sketches in his article, but they are not assimilable to the narrative about “the end of AIDS” that he wants to promulgate, meaning that, for Sullivan, they effectively do not constitute AIDS-related deaths at all.¹⁵

Sullivan’s fetishism blinds him also to the fact that he takes his own experience of the development of protease inhibitors not as the experience of a privileged subject—white, male, living in the United States, covered by health insurance—but as a universal subject. Thus Sullivan’s liberal universalism is not the enlightened political position he thinks it is; rather it is a sociopolitical fetish, constituted through the psychic mechanism of disavowal.

Recognizing Sullivan’s misrecognition of his own subjectivity, Harper begins his essay by taking his distance from Sullivan: “For quite a while now, I have strongly suspected that Andrew Sullivan and I inhabit entirely different worlds.”¹⁶ Although I know that Harper’s phrasing of his

15. Phillip Brain Harper, *Private Affairs: Critical Ventures in the Culture of Social Relations* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), pp. 93–94.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

differences with Sullivan in this way is deliberately arch, I keep getting hung up on it, because, as fully in accord as I am with Harper's critique, I cannot feel that my disagreements with Sullivan are the result of our inhabiting different worlds. Indeed, I sometimes get the claustrophobic feeling that Andrew Sullivan and I inhabit the very same world.

That world is the world of the well-informed but nevertheless recently infected gay men who find it hard to explain, even to ourselves, how we allowed the worst to happen to us. Let me elaborate. What I share with Sullivan is that my HIV infection occurred not before HIV and AIDS were known to me, nor in ignorance of degrees of risk associated with various sexual acts, nor because of a failure to adopt safe sex as a habitual practice. Like Sullivan, I inhabit a gay world that is particularly well informed about every aspect of HIV, from modes of transmission to methods of treatment. Also like Sullivan, my being gay is part of my public as well as my private identity, and dealing with AIDS has formed a large part of my recent professional life. I have devoted countless hours to thinking, writing, and speaking publicly about AIDS. I thus share with Sullivan a certain privilege concerning AIDS, a privilege that, say, a young African American or Latino gay man is unlikely to share. That privilege only increases the shame of having risked infection.

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What I do not share with Andrew Sullivan is the explanation of why that risk was taken. Sullivan attributes his HIV infection to his failure to live up to his ethical ideal of a committed monogamous relationship. Here is a portion of what he says about his risky behavior in the version of "When Plagues End" expanded for his book *Love Undetectable*:

I remember in particular the emotional spasm I felt at the blithe comment of an old and good high school friend of mine, when I told him I was infected. He asked who had infected me; and I told him that, without remembering any particular incident of unsafe sex, I didn't really know. The time between my negative test and my positive test was over a year, I explained. It could have been anyone. "Anyone?" he asked, incredulously. "How many people did you sleep with, for God's sake?"

*Too many, God knows. Too many for meaning and dignity to be given to every one; too many for love to be present in each. . . .*¹⁷

I find this passage deeply repulsive. First, I want to respond, What kind of friend, on learning you've become HIV-positive, asks "Who infected you?" and then chastises you for having too much sex? But more important, I want to ask, How many sex partners are too many? How do you quantify meaning? dignity? love? One can only assume from what Sullivan writes that these qualities *redeem* sex, but do so only in inverse proportion to the number of sex partners. *This is ethics?*

Well, of course, it is what passes for ethics in Sullivan's religion, which requires indeed that sex be redeemed—by procreation—and that it take place only within sanctified marriage. This is nothing new. What is new is that it also provides Sullivan with a ready excuse for his own "lapse": "With regard to homosexuality, I inherited no moral or religious teaching that could guide me to success or failure. . . . In over thirty years of weekly churchgoing, I have never heard a homily that attempted to explain how a gay man should live, or how his sexuality should be expressed."¹⁸ And yet Sullivan clearly did inherit a sexual morality, for he is capable of the most standard moralizing statements about sexual promiscuity, which are at the same time, of course, standard versions of homophobia. The following phrases and sentences appear within a few pages of each other in *Love Undetectable*:

. . . the sexual pathologies which plague homosexuals . . .

. . . it is perhaps not surprising that [homosexuals'] moral and sexual behavior becomes wildly dichotic; that it veers from compulsive activity to shame and withdrawal; or that it becomes anesthetized by drugs or alcohol or fatally distorted by the false, crude ideology of easy prophets.

17. Sullivan, *Love Undetectable*, p. 41.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

. . . [gay liberationists] constructed and defended and glorified the abattoirs of the epidemic, even when they knew exactly what was going on. Yes, of course, because their ultimate sympathy lay with those trapped in this cycle, they were more morally defensible than condemning or oblivious outsiders. But they didn't help matters by a knee-jerk defense of catastrophic self-destruction, dressed up as cutting-edge theory.

*There is little doubt that the ideology that human beings are mere social constructions and that sex is beyond good and evil facilitated a world in which gay men literally killed each other by the thousands.*¹⁹

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Sullivan's diatribe against gay men's sexual culture—whose “abattoirs” he nevertheless finds enticing enough to continue visiting regularly—merges in these latter passages with attacks on liberation politics and queer theory. As someone who published “cutting-edge” theoretical defenses of continuing promiscuity in the face of AIDS, I can only assume this venom is meant for me. So for all that I may share Sullivan's world, I clearly share nothing of his worldview.

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But I return to what we do share: our recent HIV infections. I characterize Sullivan's explanation of his infection as symptomatic of melancholia because it entails self-abasement, a self-abasement that in Sullivan's case is also a rationalization. Sullivan locates himself within the moralizing narrative about gay men and AIDS that I outlined above. As someone who grew up before AIDS, he considers himself an irrevocably damaged soul, condemned by his church's homophobia to live out his sexual life in the ethical vacuum that was gay life before the epidemic. He can never attain the responsible adulthood that he sees as the great gift of AIDS to gay men because he is too fundamentally deformed by Catholic homophobia ever to attain his ideals. He can only hold up his ideals for the next generation. “Yes,” Sullivan writes, “I longed for a relationship that could resolve these conflicts, channel sex into love and commitment and responsibility, but, for whatever reasons, I didn't find

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 50–53.

it. Instead I celebrated and articulated its possibility, and did everything I could to advance the day when such relationships could become the norm.”²⁰ He presented his case even more pathetically to PBS’s talk-show host Charlie Rose in 1997: “I sort of feel like it’s too late for me. It’s too late for my generation. The damage has already been done. We have already struggled for years to overcome the lower standards that we set for ourselves when we were seven and eight and nine.” I feel obliged to call attention to Sullivan’s sneaky shift in this statement from blaming homophobia for the damage done to his generation of gay men to simply *blaming his generation of gay men*. But my point is actually an opposite one: Sullivan resorts to this notion that it’s too late for him in order to absolve himself of the very responsibilities that he demands of others. “Grow up,” he insists, “even though I don’t have to, because, you know, I’m forever damaged.” Sullivan gets to have his seventh and eighth and ninth birthday cake and eat it too.

Grow up! It’s really not so easy, at least not when growing up means growing older. Bette Davis was right: “Old age is not for sissies.” I don’t know if she meant the kind of sissies who adore Bette Davis, but for *this* sissy getting older has been damned hard. So Sullivan’s moralizing admonition to gay men to grow up has a peculiar resonance for me. As I said above, I’m of a generation older than Sullivan, the gay-liberation generation he so loves to denigrate. Thus it was just as I approached middle age that the AIDS epidemic became the most determining fact of gay life in the United States. This meant that much of what had been most vital in my life—most adventurous, experimental, and exhilarating; most intimate, sustaining, and gratifying; most self-defining and self-extending—began slowly but surely to disappear. A world, a way of life, faded, then vanished. Friends and lovers died, and so did acquaintances, public figures, and faces in the crowd that I had grown accustomed to. People whose energies and resources had gone toward the invention of gay life either succumbed or turned their attention to dealing with death. Gay cultural and sexual institutions that had for twenty

20. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

years been expanding began to shrink as they came under attack or came to be too much associated with illness and death. And as all this happened—this may seem trivial, but for me it wasn't—my youthful sexual confidence and sense of desirability waned. The midlife crisis that is a banal event in every privileged person's life was overdetermined for me because it occurred in the midst of an epidemic that devastated my world. Facing my own mortality—the real content of this crisis—was profoundly confusing because I was consumed by it at a time when the truth of my situation was that I was healthy and vigorous while tens of thousands like me were dying.

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I cannot say precisely what significance this confusion had for my risking HIV infection. Did I seek unconsciously to resolve the paradox of my own good health when I “should” have been sick? Did I try to reclaim the adventure and exhilaration of my younger self? All I know for sure is that feelings of loss pervaded my life. I felt overwhelming loss just walking the streets of New York, the city that since the late 1960s had given me my sense of being really alive.²¹ This was certainly melancholia too, but unlike the melancholia that produces moralistic abjection, this was the opposite; my version of melancholia prevented me from acquiescing in and thus mourning the demise of a culture that had shown me the ethical alternative to conventional moralism, a culture that taught me what Thomas Keenan designates in *Fables of Responsibility* “the only responsibility worthy of the name,” responsibility that “comes with the removal of grounds, the withdrawal of the rules or the knowledge on which we might rely to make our decisions for us. No grounds means no alibis, no elsewhere to which we might refer the instance of our decision. . . . It is when we do not know exactly what we should do, when the effects and conditions of our actions can no longer be calculated, and

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21. Further overdetermination: The AIDS crisis also coincided with profound transformations in New York City, where, for example, previously abandoned or peripheral neighborhoods that were home to gay sexual culture were reappropriated and gentrified by the real-estate industry, thus making them inhospitable to the uses we'd invented for them.

when we have nowhere else to turn, not even back onto our 'self,' that we encounter something like responsibility."²²

Whereas Andrew Sullivan sees gay men as irresponsible because homophobia prevented the arbiters of morality from providing us with rules by which to live, thus creating a moral vacuum, I see this vacuum as the precondition for the truly ethical way of life that gay men struggled to create. AIDS didn't make gay men grow up and become responsible. AIDS showed anyone willing to pay attention how genuinely ethical the invention of gay life had been. This doesn't mean that gay life is not riven with conflict or that being gay grants anyone automatic ethical claims. But the removal of grounds that Keenan sees as the beginning of authentic responsibility has been a condition of being gay in America—simply because the ground rules that are given are ones that disqualify us from the start. I will therefore call this genuine responsibility queer. And I will suggest that it is identical with, or constitutive of, the vitality that I felt from my participation in queer life prior to the epidemic. Obviously this is not the only place one might experience its vertiginous appeal, but it is where I experienced it. This is also to say that genuine responsibility can be experienced in the exhilarating disorientation of sex itself. Thus responsibility is not that which would obligate us to modify or curtail sex, or to justify or redeem it. On the contrary, responsibility may well *follow from* sex. This has obviously made sex terribly paradoxical for gay men during an epidemic of a sexually transmitted deadly disease syndrome. The paradox has meant that we've had to live with an especially heavy burden of conflict, with deep and enduring ambivalence. And we've had to discern and resist the easy answers that moralistic attitudes toward sex would provide to falsely resolve our conflict and ambivalence. And, adding insult to injury, we've had to watch as the U.S. media have given ever more prominent voice to gay spokesmen who unhesitatingly voice the moralism, gay men who go on *Nightline* and *Charlie Rose* and, with immodest self-certainty, assume their proper responsibility.

22. Thomas Keenan, *Fables of Responsibility: Aberrations and Predicaments in Ethics and Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 1–2.



I tried to capture something of the paradox gay men have faced in the title of one of the first essays I wrote about AIDS, upping the ante of “How to Have Sex in an Epidemic,” the first safe-sex pamphlet, to “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic.” That essay was, together with “AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism,” the first I wrote about AIDS, and it contained what would become the opening salvo in an ongoing critique of moralistic responses to the epidemic. Much has changed since then, but then again much has remained the same. I might mention, for example, that twenty years into the AIDS epidemic, Jesse Helms is still the senator from North Carolina, and he is, if anything, more powerful now than in 1987, when he first succeeded in preventing the federal funding of safe-sex information directed at gay men. Sometimes the *déjà vu* seems more like a nightmare from which we cannot awaken: In February 2001 artist and AIDS activist Donald Moffett felt compelled to reinstall a public art work he’d initially made in 1990, a light box photo-text work that said, “Call the White House . . . Tell Bush we’re not all dead yet”—this time in response to George W.’s intention to close the White House AIDS office within weeks of assuming office.²³

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If the argument contained in the trajectory of these essays is right, however, there *has* been a drastic change, but it is a psychic change, a change in the way we think about AIDS, or rather a change that consists in our inability to continue thinking about AIDS. Throughout the early 1990s AIDS became an increasingly unbearable and therefore more deeply repressed topic, AIDS activism became virtually invisible, and gay politics moved steadily Rightward. I had begun to see this configuration of repression, trouble among activists, and moralistic politics at the turn of the decade. “Mourning and Militancy,” the title of which that of this book is meant to echo, was my first attempt to theorize this turn;

23. Bush was unable to follow through on his intention because it caused such an outcry among gay people and public health advocates. Instead Bush appointed to head the White House Office of National AIDS Policy a prominent gay Republican, a Catholic who had been active as an antiabortion fundraiser. See Elizabeth Becker, “Gay Republican Will Run White House AIDS Office,” *New York Times*, April 9, 2001, p. A13.



Donald Moffett, *Call the White House*, 1990/2001 (photo: George Kimmerling).

it marks a critical juncture in AIDS activism and serves as a theoretical core of the entire collection.²⁴

24. Insofar as these essays are intended to contribute to a historical record of debates about AIDS and queer politics, I have decided against making any substantive changes to my essays as originally written and published. The change that I would most wish to make is in the opening paragraph of "Mourning and Militancy," where I criticize Lee Edelman's deconstruction of the AIDS-activist slogan SILENCE=DEATH in "The Plague of Discourse." That essay was my first encounter with Edelman's work, which I have subsequently grown to admire immensely. Moreover, my opening paragraph tends to drive a wedge between academic theory and activist practice

This configuration is also essential to the questions addressed in “Right On, Girlfriend!” and “Don’t Tell.” “Right On, Girlfriend!” explores the problems posed for ACT UP’s coalition politics when notions of fixed, coherent identities came into conflict; it thus takes up forms of moralism that exist within both gay identity politics and traditional Left politics. “Don’t Tell” analyzes the rhetoric of the Campaign for Military Service during the gays-in-the-military debates in the early months of the Clinton presidency, seeing in the portrayal of gay and lesbian military personnel as model patriots—politically conservative, healthy, and chaste—the desire to suppress the increasingly unbearable image of the sick person with AIDS and the image of anal sex that is so inevitably linked, at least in fantasy, to that sickness. The final essay of this collection, “Sex and Sensibility, or Sense and Sexuality” confronts the new moralism head-on in the positions of the new crop of mainstream gay journalists, including Sullivan, and in affiliation with the short-lived activist group Sex Panic!’s attempt to defend gay sexual culture and rejuvenate HIV prevention efforts.

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If the defense of gay sexual culture and the critique of moralism are central to my essays, so too is a theoretical understanding of cultural representation as an essential site of political struggle, indeed of the struggle for life itself. As against the real-world-versus-culture reductionism of fundamentalisms Right and Left, my position has remained the one I laid out in “AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism”: “If we recognize that AIDS exists only in and through its representations, culture, and politics, then the hope is that we can also recognize the imperative to know them, analyze them, and wrest control of them.” This “cultural studies” position came to me not in some idle moment of speculation, or from reading what many would dismiss as “trendy academic theory,”

that I hope the essay itself otherwise contests. Edelman’s own deconstruction of that split with regard to the rhetoric of AIDS activism can be found in “The Mirror and the Tank: ‘AIDS,’ Subjectivity, and the Rhetoric of Activism” (in *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* [New York: Routledge, 1994], pp. 93–117); the essay is, among other things, Edelman’s extremely tactful—and brilliant—rejoinder to my critique, and one that I find use for in my own later piece “Rosa’s Indulgence,” in this volume.

but as a lesson learned through my participation in ACT UP. In this, Daniel Harris's preposterous contention that postmodern theory exerted deleterious effects on AIDS activism gets things precisely backwards. What makes Harris's position even more preposterous is his disdain for what were in fact productive new relations between cultural theory and activist practice. For example:

For AIDS activists, this deconstructive skepticism [toward an "objective" reality of AIDS] manifests itself in the new interest not so much in circumventing as in manipulating the media, in seizing hold of the actual apparatus by which various moral interpretations of the disease are conveyed to the average consumer. The Media Committee of ACT UP, for example, has taken its cue from the White House and gone so far as to prepare press kits, which it has distributed before several of its demonstrations. Eager reporters and television crews dutifully plagiarized this material and ultimately reported what was "sold" to them in advance.²⁵

To which I can only respond: What could be bad? The fact that ACT UP was able thoroughly to inform the media about the complex issues at stake during its demonstrations—against the Food and Drug Administration, for example—and that this resulted in better informed media coverage when the demonstrations occurred is certainly one of ACT UP's signal accomplishments. Can anyone living in contemporary American society honestly believe that media representations are extraneous to "real" politics?²⁶

25. Daniel Harris, "AIDS and Theory: Has Academic Theory Turned AIDS into Meta-Death?" *Lingua Franca*, June 1991, p. 18. In attributing the invention of press kits to the White House, Harris reveals the depth of his ignorance of the media.

26. Harris's numerous journalistic writings about gay and AIDS issues generally give away the fact that he is driven by an embittered disaffection with—or perhaps self-imposed exclusion from—much of gay life; thus: "In the heart of San Francisco's Castro district, where I live, the ACT UP logo itself has so much cachet, offers such tangible proof of one's membership in a snugly insular klatch of one's peers, that it has become the Gucci or Calvin Klein designer label of the 1990s, a clubbish insignia that announces cliquishness rather than political conviction" ("A Blizzard of Images" [a review of my book *AIDS Demo Graphics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990)], *Nation*, Decem-

This is not to say that I embraced all of ACT UP's cultural interventions uncritically. In "Portraits of People with AIDS," I voice my skepticism toward the activist demand for positive images of people living with AIDS, arguing for a more complicated understanding of representation and its effects. I return to this question in "Accommodating Magic," where the activist demand is finally met by the mainstream media in its reporting about Magic Johnson's HIV illness—with predictably homophobic results.

But AIDS activism does not speak of representation or make representations with a single voice. In "De-Moralizing Representations of AIDS," I compare Gregg Bordowitz's feature-length account of his own history as a maker of AIDS-activist videos in *Fast Trip, Long Drop* (1993) to *Voices from the Front* (1992), a more conventional AIDS-activist documentary covering the history of ACT UP. While Bordowitz attempts to confront his own impending death as a means of reflecting on the toll that death has taken on the AIDS activist movement, *Voices from the Front* fails to acknowledge that toll. Its failure is, I think, a legacy of activism's history of masculinist heroism; in falling prey to this legacy by mythologizing AIDS activism, *Voices from the Front* also misrepresents a strategic shift in activist politics that was another signal contribution of ACT UP, the insertion of self-deprecating humor into activism as a means of deflating the heroics. A good example of ACT UP's style of humor is Matt Ebert and Ryan Landry's *Marta: Portrait of a Teen Activist*, made at an ACT UP demonstration at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta in 1990. The video wonderfully captures how—far from heroic—terribly awkward, how terribly queer it can feel to engage in activism. Marta's perpetual confusion—she can't decide which placard to carry, she carries it upside down once she decides, she keeps checking out fellow activists to figure out how to position herself properly for a "die-

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ber 31, 1990, p. 852). "Cachet," "snugly insular klatch," "clubbish," "cliquishness"—the overkill of his language tells a different story than the one Harris seems to think he's writing. The question here, like the question as to why the *New York Times* indulges the personal *ressentiment* of Andrew Sullivan toward a wider gay culture, is, Why does the *Nation* publish it?

in”—is hilariously captured by Ryan Landry in school-girl drag as Marta, named after the acronym for Atlanta’s mass-transit system.

Harris’s view of this innovation is that “While it is true that ACT UP has infused the flagging political momentum of the 1960s with camp and theatricality, there is a sense in which the intellectual underpinnings of the organization have made activism not more radically interventionist but more passively theoretical.”²⁷ Harris’s complaint demonstrates that he is oblivious to the fact that ACT UP’s queer antics not only provide an image of an antiheroic activism but also deconstruct the homophobic construction whereby “radical activism” is guaranteed by its upright repudiation of “passive theory.” Our ability to see such conventional oppositions *as homophobic* has, of course, been a significant contribution of queer theory. The active/passive binary employed by Harris here is the subject of a shrewd analysis of the more humorless varieties of AIDS-activist rhetoric by Lee Edelman, who asks whether “on the one hand, in our defense of an already beleaguered gay identity, we want to emulate the widespread heterosexual contempt for the image of a gay sexuality represented as passive and narcissistic . . . or whether, on the other hand, we want to refuse the ‘choice’ ideologically imposed by such a binarism—whether we want to deny the incompatibility of passivity and power, and thereby to undertake the construction of a gay subjectivity that need not define itself against its own subset of demonized ‘faggots.’”²⁸

Nearly all of these essays seek to expose homophobic representations and their disastrous consequences for public health during the epidemic. These include routine representations of “bad gays”: Randy Shilts’s murderously irresponsible Patient Zero in *And the Band Played On* (“How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic” and “Randy Shilts’s Miserable Failure”), a figure who returns as the “gay serial killer” Andrew Cunanan, fantasized by the media as taking revenge for an HIV infection that he never even had (“Sex and Sensibility, or Sense

27. Harris, “AIDS and Theory,” p. 18.

28. Edelman, *Homographesis*, pp. 109–110.

and Sexuality”); and Jonathan Demme’s homosexualized psychopaths Buffalo Bill and Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of the Lambs* (“Right On, Girlfriend!”). And then there are the reverse, the good nongays (good because they’re not gay): Magic Johnson’s representation of himself to Arsenio Hall as “far from being homosexual” as the basis for his becoming a positive image of someone living with HIV (“Accommodating Magic”); or the not-so-gay good gays: Demme’s de-homosexualized positive-image gay man with AIDS in *Philadelphia* (“De-Moralizing Representations of AIDS”). And then there are representations that conceal the sex in the homosexual: Nicholas Nixon’s portrayals of people with AIDS as fleshless and ethereal in phobic defense against the possibility that a person with AIDS might still have sex (“Portraits of People with AIDS”); the Names Project quilt’s sanitization of gay lives in order that gay deaths can be mourned (“The Spectacle of Mourning”); the chaste gay soldiers in the rhetoric of the Campaign for Military Service (“Don’t Tell”); and my own “overlooking” of the homoerotic codes of Edward Weston’s photographs of his child Neil (“The Boys in My Bedroom”). Or again the reverse, the picture that refuses to cover up homosexual sex: Rosa von Praunheim’s “narcissistic” representations of his sexual pleasures counteracting his own moralistic rhetoric in *Army of Lovers* (“Rosa’s Indulgence”); and Robert Mapplethorpe’s *Helmut and Brooks* as a picture of what is most feared and hated about gay men (“Painful Pictures”). These last are not homophobic representations; rather they are representations that show how pictured homosexuality solicits homophobia.

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Finally, there is the question of artists’ representations of AIDS. I first took up the subject of AIDS as an editor of the cultural journal *OCTOBER*, thinking it would be useful to evaluate the art world’s response to the epidemic. As I became more immersed in the crisis, I expanded my project to include a much broader range of thought and action engaged in the struggle against AIDS. What most struck me as I became more deeply involved were the ways in which the institutions of art marginalized the work of direct political engagement. I thus wrote a polemical introduction to the special issue of the journal calling for direct action on the part of the art world. My polemic provoked some indignant reac-

tions. A well-known gay writer called me a Stalinist in the *L.A. Weekly*.²⁹ A prominent gay English professor told a mutual friend that he would never forgive me for being mean to Liz Taylor (I had accused her of mouthing platitudes about art's universality in a speech she made for an Art against AIDS fundraising gala). And a gay critic complained in *Artforum* that I had made him feel bad for liking David Wojnarowicz's art.³⁰ Writing a retrospective essay on art and AIDS some ten years later, the same critic, evidently still hung up on my having championed activist art, quoted the writer who'd called me a Stalinist—by now he was just calling me an “art-hating activist”—and went on to *misquote* one of my most often-cited manifesto-like statements: “We don't need a cultural renaissance, we need cultural practices actively participating in the struggle against AIDS. We don't need to transcend the epidemic; we need to end it.”³¹ I unapologetically stand by that statement today.

This is not to say that I don't regret that my polemical views came off to some as doctrinaire, uncharitable, and proscriptive. I guess when I first got caught up in the AIDS maelstrom in the 1980s (remember, this was when Ronald Reagan was president and wouldn't even utter the word *AIDS*, much less spend any government money on it), I got pretty damned angry, in part at what seemed to me inadequate or ineffectual responses. I hope, though, that one result of having these essays all to-

29. “AGAINST NATURE, as has often been true of Dennis [Cooper]’s work, was given a chilly reception; Dennis refers to this as the beginning of the Stalinist period of gay art. Douglas Crimp, in a speech called ‘Art and Activism’ [‘Good Ole Bad Boys’ in this volume], went out of his way to castigate AGAINST NATURE, and laid out the position that has become the official gay-politico/ACT Upish line, which stridently rejects the personal” (Eric Latzky, “He Cried: Novelist Dennis Cooper Hits Home,” *L.A. Weekly*, July 23, 1990, p. 27).

30. David Deitcher, “Ideas and Emotions,” *Artforum* 27, 9 (May 1989), pp. 122–127.

31. Deitcher quoted a note by Dennis Cooper and Richard Hawkins on their exhibition *Against Nature* written for *In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice*, ed. Nayland Blake, Lawrence Rinder, and Amy Scholder (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1995, p. 57). See David Deitcher, “What Does Silence Equal Now?” in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine (New York: New York University Press, 1999); the misquote of my essay appears on page 106.

gether in strict chronological order will show that I took these early criticisms seriously and tried to make my arguments more nuanced. Just a year after making my case in “AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism” for “a critical, theoretical, activist alternative to the personal, elegiac expressions that dominated the art-world response to AIDS,” I wrote “Portraits of People with AIDS.” While that essay, too, is a polemic against representations I found counterproductive, in this case I posed as the alternative a deeply moving elegy in the form of the independent video *Danny* by Stashu Kybartas. In thus championing a work of mourning I was attempting to say that I had not meant to be either pre- or proscriptive about the form or genre of artwork about AIDS.

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Still, I continued—and continue—to be troubled by the fact that the art world’s most unwavering conviction is the old saw *Vita brevis, ars longa*, or “Art lives on forever,” to use Elizabeth Taylor’s words that caused me to be mean. This conviction generally translates into a repudiation of “political art,” politics being far too contingent. “Political art” *doesn’t* live on forever; it lives most fully in the moment of its intervention. From my perspective, however—one that I had been elaborating for a decade prior to writing about AIDS—this contingency of political investment is the necessary condition of all art, one that traditional idealist notions of art, summed up in a maxim like *Vita brevis, ars longa*, work to conceal. As Rosalyn Deutsche has recently stated, “I, like many artists and critics, avoid the term ‘political art’: Precisely because it asserts that other art—indeed art per se or so-called real art—is not political, ‘political art’ is a powerful political weapon, one that is routinely deployed to ghettoize art that avows the political.”³² I take up this problem in “Good Ole Bad Boys,” in which I confront the curators of an exhibition conceived as a repudiation of my *OCTOBER* polemic.

There is, though, a twofold danger in arguing for art’s avowal of politics, or to argue for activist art practices as I had: First, it can too easily make

32. “Every Art Form Has a Political Dimension,” Chantal Mouffe, interviewed by Rosalyn Deutsche, Branden W. Joseph, and Thomas Keenan, *Grey Room* 02 (winter 2001), p. 100.

it appear that there *is* such a thing as art that is beyond politics rather than art that simply disavows its politics; second, and more important, it can make it appear that what is political—or activist—and what is not is self-evident. I write about this problem of essentializing activism in “A Day without Gertrude,” in which I argue that the politics of representation is rarely so simple as the direct avowal of a political position.

Having said that, I nevertheless want to end this introduction by stating a few political positions unequivocally:

I am not now and never have been a member of the Communist Party, Stalinist or otherwise (although I did once vote for Angela Davis for President).

I think Elizabeth Taylor is a great movie star; I love her for being such a good friend to the fabulous Hollywood homos Montgomery Clift, James Dean, and Rock Hudson; and I consider her a saint for all she's done in the fight against AIDS.

I have never suggested that anyone shouldn't like David Wojnarowicz's art; I like it myself.

And finally, I don't hate art; I like it. I've spent my entire professional life thinking about it, and I still like it.