Queer Analog Pleasure and Digital Ambivalence:
LGBTQ Media Worlds in Nostalgic Times

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(Film, Television, and Media)
in the University of Michigan
2024

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Acknowledgements

This project emerges from a vast network of support and influence without which I would be lost. I would first and foremost like to thank the University of Michigan and the Rackham Graduate School for their substantial support over my graduate school career. I'd like to thank Rob Pettigrew of the Michigan library for his stress-easing expertise in dissertation formatting. I'd also like to thank the archives of The Center, New York City's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, & Transgender Community Center for their preservation of the Liz Eden papers which factor into my fourth chapter. Thank you to the UCLA Active Research and Study Center and their housed collection of Outfest programs that I analyze in the fifth chapter, and to Cáel M. Keegan and Maria San Filippo for their feedback on that chapter. Thank you to Malic Amalya for providing me with an online streaming copy of *FlyHole* and information about the film's creation.

I would like to thank the entire faculty and staff of the department of Film, Television, & Media that has been my academic home for the past eight years. I would like to especially thank the following people affiliated with the department: Phil Hallman, who helped me with access to the Bob Mizer Foundation materials described in the introduction and graciously employed me as a research assistant; Daniel Herbert, who served as the director of graduate studies for the majority of my time here and was a completely invaluable supporter of my work; Mark Kligerman, whom I most frequently taught for as a GSI and has been a wonderful mentor and friend; Carrie Moore, whose encyclopedic knowledge of department and university policy saved my sanity on more than one occasion; and Veerendra Prasad, who let me sit in on screenwriting

classes and has been a great friend. Thank you to Candace Moore and Josh Morrison, legends who helped me acclimate to this strange world and provided a strong base of queer support in my early years at Michigan. Outside my own department, I've had the privilege to take many graduate seminars that molded my thinking in bold and stimulating ways. Thank you to those professors: Megan Sapnar Ankerson, Sonya Dal Cin, Dean Hubbs, Aswin Punathembekar, Gayle Rubin, and Katherine Sender. Thank you additionally to Prof. Hubbs for providing feedback on a version of my third chapter.

I'm grateful to have completed this dissertation while in-residence with many brilliant and warm graduate student colleagues, all of whom I'm honored to have traveled alongside for this bizarre journey. To list just a few: James Anderson, Bailey Apollonio, Joseph DeLeon, Amber Hardiman, Nicky Hentrich, Kady Kidd, Vincent Longo, Richard M. Minaya, Josh Schulze, Olivia Stowell, Ben Strassfeld, Kaelie Thompson, and Grace Wilsey. Thank you to the brilliant Brinni Gentry for taking notes at my defense, and for her excellent taste in a life partner, Sam Cooper. Thank you to Sophia Chen and Tanite Chahwan for never losing touch with a manic streak of energy and play that I've called upon many times. Thank you to Júlia Irion Martins, her partner Ben Simko, and Amanda Kubic for their faith in the healing properties of reality television. Thank you to Kayti Lausch, Anne Charlotte Mecklenburg, and Katy Peplin for their reassuring wealth of learned grad school expertise and faultless pop culture taste. Thank you to my sister-in-neurodivergence and most frequent cinema companion Yuki Nakayama. Lastly, thank you to my chosen cohort, whom I adopted as a lonely cohort of one, Marissa Spada, who saw me through this entire journey as an eternal confidence booster and trusted friend. Thank you also to GEO, the graduate employees' organization, which protected the rights of graduate student workers through an especially choppy chapter of university history.

Thank you to the mentors I've had in the pursuit of this career. My time at American University for my BA and MA looms large in laying the foundations for my work here, and I'd like to especially thank Despina Kakoudaki, Jeff Middents, and Lily Wong for nourishing the passion and skill I would cultivate to this point. Thank you additionally to Jeff for screening *Dog Day Afternoon* in my first-ever film class, an act that undoubtedly hatched the fourth chapter of this dissertation, and to Lily for providing my first deep encounter with the queer temporality theory that fuels much of this project. Thank you to Despina for being the sharpest model of critical reading to which I aspire to this day. My mentors at Michigan, in the form of my sparkling dissertation committee, have all shaped this project enormously. Thank you to Petra Kuppers for providing a model of the embodied, innovative scholarship and pedagogy I hope to cultivate. Thank you to Caryl Flinn, mistress of all things camp and kitsch, for your excellence as a scholar. Thank you to Hollis Griffin for your tireless energy and wisdom. And most of all, thank you to my heroic advisor Sarah Murray, who expanded my mind in a first-year seminar and saw me through that initial paper's metamorphosis into an entire dissertation. Thank you for your patience and support through every frenzied email and long-winded over-think.

In the way of concluding, thank you to those outside the strict parameters of my academic work for filling my life with joy and forming the base of my support system. Thank you to Katie Golden, Lizzy Golden, Jacob Gorski, Ryan Venezia, my therapist Annette Marciel, my parents Steven and Nancy, my brother Ryan, his wife Katie, and a handful of dogs I've known. Lastly, thank you to the drag queens Trixie Mattel and Katya Zamolodchikova, whose YouTube videos perfectly structure breaks between writing, and are thus chemically baked-in to the fibers of this dissertation.

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Abstract

LGBTQ people are not always encouraged to be nostalgic. Dominant historical narratives of the development of LGBTQ rights in the United States emphasize a blooming distribution of legal rights and normative public acceptance that gestures emphatically towards a generous present and a hopeful future. In spite of this, LGBTQ media has long-demonstrated a sentimental proclivity for the past, luxuriating in reconstructions of prior time periods, and often anachronistically summoning a fusion of past and present. Queer retreats to the past in film, television, online media, and festival cultures are often motivated by the perceived wealth of freedoms open to queer subjects prior to the ossification of homonormative politics and legible sexual minority identities, as Douglas Crimp describes it, a time "queer before gay" (58). This often lends a radical ethos to nostalgia, but one that does not go uncomplicated by other material political factors. The persistent allure of the past for queer people shapes a structure of feeling that constructs media texts, media publics, and the complex channels of affective exchange surrounding them.

Demarcating a transmedial genre I term LGBTQ nostalgia media, my dissertation traces the cultural work of imagined fantasies of the LGBTQ past. LGBTQ nostalgia media come to serve three general uses in media ecosystems. First, LGBTQ nostalgia media is a pleasure structure formulating queer attachments to the past and lending them formal character with a critical socio-affective functionality. Second, LGBTQ nostalgia media act as cultural archives that document the past (and representations of the past) to lend a weighted stability to histories frequently conceived affectively, as the ephemeral transmission of feeling and coded semiotics.

Third, LGBTQ nostalgia media acts as a mediation and attempted reconciliation of tension and mixed feelings about the transformations of LGBTQ history, the definitions and politics of community, and changing avenues of media consumption. My chapters focus on clusters of media that uniquely gesture to points of tension and discord in the LGBTQ historical imagination, and evidence the ways nostalgia is constructed as an ambivalent affective formation for LGBTQ media audiences and users– one often a staging ground for the attempted resolution of social pressures.

Employing a transmedial collection of case studies– across prestige historical cinema, sexual hookup cultures online, documentary, and film festival environments– I utilize theoretically-informed textual analysis to understand the cultural work of feeling in LGBTQ nostalgia media. The first half of the dissertation focuses on the textual shape of nostalgic pleasure, rooted in an erotics of presence and absence articulated through the discursive frames of tactility and knowability. The second half turns to questions of community and networked affect, seeking to understand the flow of feeling across complicated, diverse publics, and the social borders inevitably impacting nostalgic pleasure. Overall, this dissertation considers the notable work of analog pleasures in queer world-building, calculated and mediated against structures of digital ambivalence.

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 The Obsolescent Beefcake Online

If you were a "confirmed bachelor" in the United States in the mid-twentieth century, you might have come across the magazine *Physique Pictorial.* A showcase of male models, at the height of the "physique era" of intricately posed body builders and beefcakes in tiny modeling pouches, *Physique Pictorial* began production in Los Angeles in 1945, serving a wide national audience. Via a coy celebration of "physical fitness," carefully veiling homoerotic imagery against the gaze of censorship, the magazine was able to give voice, discreetly, to a queer male public sphere. The magazine was created through the Athletic Model Guild (AMG), a company started by photographer and gay man Bob Mizer. In the fifties, with Mizer in a newfound role as director, the AMG began producing homoerotic short films, sold with the magazines to an underground viewership across the United States (Padva 38-40). The magazines, which most often followed a "profile" structure introducing the reader to each model, staged a fantasy: smiling, eager models– primarily white men with some rarer appearance from models of color– fresh off the bus to Hollywood, starry-eyed with big dreams in a flirty homo-social environment, rough-housing with other men in a sunny California dream.

The films escalated this fantasy, putting the men to work in short silent sketches against the bare-bones sets of prisons, military bootcamps, and locker rooms, playing out erotic power struggles in statuesque pantomime. These films laid the groundwork for the dominant settings of gay pornography that would emerge decades later. Even beyond strictly pornographic traditions, one could call Mizer the first American queer director-producer totally devoted to the production

of queer cinematic images, codifying an aesthetics of queer male representation well in advance of the Stonewall Riot lynchpin so frequently used to frame LGBTQ history as a quick progression out of the closet. In the process, the discreet eroticism of the physique era, residually visible in the photography and filmmaking that survives from this time period, reflects a historical imaginary of sepia-hued queer social life. It is the bare material of a historical fantasy, one available in the present as a textuality generating affective transmission. Christopher Nealon, in *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall* (2001), further elaborates that physique culture "links the muscleboy's body to a utopian vision of the social body and links a particular understanding of group life back to the homoerotic pleasures of the body" (105). This social body, which Nealon here puts in conversation with the *corporeal* body, the one giving and receiving pleasure, is an aggregate of emotions transmitted by the "silly utopias" (139) of physique culture– an "aggressive wholesomeness" (100) betraying discreet eroticism themed around "the fun, friendly homosexual of physique culture– the regular guy who just wants to hang out with the guys and lift weights" (102).

I am touched by the unique affects at the crossroads of the cheesy and the melancholy in the smiley, obsolescent beefcake. Engaging with physique images like these in the 21st century, I find myself in an encounter with ghosts. These ghosts are not just the men themselves– models working for a paycheck who may or may not be queer, and are in most cases no longer living– but ghosts of the ambient presence of a queer social public, the ephemeral coordinations binding queer people to a shared orientation of living in whispers and hidden magazine stashes. The images of corny gym bros wield a desire that is naughty, transgressive, and vibrant against the iconography of a time period wed to repression and discrimination. There is danger and fear, lurking in any suggestion of the vulnerability of queerness in an unsafe world. But above all

there is a curious suggestion of *roots.* I am not a photographer nor a model caught up in an economy of sexual imagery, but within a trans-temporal gaze I suddenly feel a warm streak of recognition. Queer, *then.* Across the morass of time and the heavy baggage of gender and sexuality discourses, media has enabled me to forge a vulnerable bridge of relating one haphazard messy (theoretically) queer subjectivity to my own. And having identified it, I feel suddenly pulled to it. I am feeling a nostalgic attachment. And I'm not alone– Nealon documents how the 1990s saw an outpouring of interest in mid-twentieth century queer physique culture in the disparate nostalgia industries of scholarship, coffee-table books, greeting cards, and home video releases (136).

I'm interested in a different moment of nostalgic investment in the ghosts of physique culture, one spanning across different media platforms to encompass the internet and digital technology. In 2017, *Physique Pictorial* re-emerged under the leadership of the non-profit Bob Mizer Foundation (BMF), picking up right where the original run left off, with issue 42 coming after 1990's 41. The glossy relaunch issues are curated by an editorial team of photographers as a two-pronged venture: offering both curated selections of antique beefcake pictures alongside homoerotic photography by contemporary artists expressing an indebtedness to or love for the discreet homoeroticism of the physique era. The fusion of old and new results in a curious mixture of full-frontal nudity from its contemporary male models divided by physique photography's self-effacing discretion as a guiding heuristic. Apart from this erotic time travel, the cover images of each revival issue foreground photography by Mizer himself, most often from the halcyon 1940s–1960s period that defines his legacy.

Figure 1.1 – Josh Paul Thomas introduces himself as "your official host for all things Mizer."

The BMF invests heavily in online communication channels– including a website, mailing list, and social media platforms. The relaunched *Physique Pictorial* even has a spokesman. Josh Paul Thomas, a photographer whose work was pivotal to the relaunch, was introduced in June 2019 (specifically for Pride month) as "your official host for all things Mizer" in a series of videos on Vimeo offering updates on the magazine, the foundation, and promotion for related events. Thomas' first video features the audio crackle of an old-fashioned film projector, toggling between different gradiations of black-and-white and sepia visualities. Stray vertical lines and imitation deterioration effects decorate the image, including the shuttering effect of a shifting projector. In the video Thomas stands shirtless on a roof top backed by palm trees and power lines, with a typical physique accessory of masculine bravado, the sailor's cap, carefully posed in embodied homage to the past (Figure 1.1). Halfway through, he appears to shift historical embodiments altogether, the sailor's cap traded for a bandana tied around the forehead and arms raised in a flex, with Thomas' inner arm tattoo more clearly visible, when

before it was hidden by a jaunty sideways pose. A clean-cut sailor on Fleet Week, with a body free of counter-cultural imprint, transforms to a body somewhere between a greaser and a 1980s jock. Thomas' body language is stiff and slightly robotic, as if mirroring physique photography tableaus in arch parody.

In the video, Thomas stresses Mizer's accomplishments as a filmmaker and photographer, his prodigious output over AMG's operating years, and his status as a transgressive outlaw, evading obscenity laws. Thomas mentions YouTube banning the BMF for pornographic content, and their subsequent flee to Vimeo, these digital queers' own experience of censorship and recovery in the face of normative oppression, an echo of Mizer's historical suppression. Perhaps Thomas, the BMF, and the digital queers watching on social media covet just an ounce of the renegade danger interwoven into physique photography. Where is the thrill of the defiantly queer today, for a time period that sees queerness subject to domestication and control? Thomas' knowing, cheesy embrace of *Physique Pictorial*'s "fun, friendly homosexual" carries a similar edge as the original models, hiding in demure masculine theater a sense of rebellion and an insistence on the erotic that is being communicated to the viewer as an inviting embrace, housing conflicts and tensions that read trans-historically. Seconds-long clips of the BMF's archives pepper the video, suturing Thomas to glimpses of long-since-aged beefcake butt, modeling strap bulge, and light BDSM provocation. The video performs this suture of a model on a mundane West Coast rooftop to the archival cinematic demi-gods of sexual history, pausing only to plug the foundation's Instagram account (Bob Mizer Foundation). In mediation, the queer thrill of the radical past is contained in a textual framework, at once pacified and elaborated in the paradoxical nature of media consumption.

Nostalgia depends on a kind of friction between past and present, the interplay of the two pitching an emotional orientation through its dual temporal registers. Each issue of the revived *Physique Pictorial* is an emblem of the mediated cultural work transpiring within a nostalgic affective formation: pathways created between past (the archived photography of Mizer) and present (the riffs on physique culture by contemporary photographers) that are stabilized by a shared affective instinct of belonging. This dissertation explores the myriad ways LGBTQ media has long demonstrated sentimental orientations towards remembering the queer past.

In mainstream media, LGBTQ people are not always encouraged to be nostalgic. Dominant historical narratives of the development of LGBTQ rights in the United States emphasize a blooming distribution of legal rights and normative public acceptance that gesture emphatically towards a generous present and a hopeful future. In spite of this, LGBTQ media has long-demonstrated a sentimental proclivity for the past and pastness, one that luxuriates in reconstructions of previous time periods (like New York City in the 1950s in Todd Haynes' film *Carol,* or the Italian countryside in the 1980s in Luca Guadagnino's *Call Me By Your Name*, both profiled in the second chapter) and keeps alive antique technological practices (like public sex cultures, covered in the third). Queer retreats to the past in film, television, online media, and film festival cultures are often motivated by the perceived wealth of freedoms open to queer people prior to the ossification of homonormative politics and identities, or as Douglas Crimp describes it, a time "queer before gay" (58). The persistent allure of the queer past, with its attendant freedoms and dangers, is an affective formation of nostalgia that constructs media texts, media publics, and the complex channels of exchange that surround them.

Nostalgia as an emotional state, category of media, and political motivation has received a lot of critical attention across a wide variety of fields in the humanities. Some of the classics of

this body of literature, such as Svetlana Boym's framing of reparative vs restorative nostalgias, will be discussed in this dissertation at length. But one of the guiding principles of this project is to bring nostalgia into conversation with the insights of affect theory, complicating a concept commonly read through scholarly canons that rely less on affective contexts, such as memory and heritage studies, which in many notable cases preceded the boom in affect theory's critical engagement.[1] I interpret nostalgia principally as a "structure of feeling," to use the concept first illustrated by Raymond Williams in 1977, referring to "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt…specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships; not feeling against thought, but thought as feeling and feeling as thought" (132). Williams' word "structure" here is meant to harness and imply shape to the more free-floating "feeling," lending organization to the abstractly pre-emotional as readable purveyors of meaning. Affect is a word usually used to describe the directives, motivations, and reactions of feeling before their meanings are significantly stabilized and labeled as legible "emotion." Following the lead of affect theorist Ann Cvetkovich, I frequently utilize "feeling" as a word that performs a gesture towards the murky interstitial space between affect and emotion. As Cvetkovich explains:

> I…like to use *feeling* as a generic term…naming the undifferentiated 'stuff' of feeling; spanning the distinctions between emotion and affect central to some theories; acknowledging the somatic or sensory nature of feelings as experiences that aren't just cognitive concepts or constructions. I favor *feeling* in part because it is intentionally

[1] Scholars in the humanities have often turned to historians and historiographers to study nostalgia, in books such as *The Past is a Foreign Country* (1985) by David Lowenthal and *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* by Andreas Huyssen (2003). These works often emphasize *memory* over *nostalgia,* but there is a lot of generative overlap between the two. Svetlana Boym's own work on nostalgia is mostly located within the realm of Eastern European studies and the aftermath of the Cold War, reflecting a specifically *national* framework in a lot of nostalgia studies. In media studies, Fredric Jameson's formulation of "nostalgia film" is often influential, which he develops originally and most succinctly in the 1984 essay "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" in *New Left Review,* studying the trend of "neo-noir" in American cinema in the 1980s, focusing on Lawrence Kasdan's *Body Heat* (1981). All of these approaches feel distant from affect theory.

> imprecise, retaining the ambiguity between feelings as embodied sensations and feelings as psychic or cognitive experiences (*Depression: A Public Feeling,* 4).

The "intentionally imprecise" nature of "feeling" as a semantic tool best illuminates the multi-faceted cultural work of affects both abstract and sedimented into emotion, the enduring power of affective impulses equaled by their consequence as discernible social entities and promises. Cvetkovich equally gestures towards affect's somatic nature, and the role of oblique sensory desires in pushing forward the motivated work of feeling. Following this lead, embodiment is a principle area of focus in my analysis of pleasure throughout this dissertation, tethering sensory capability to imagined constructs of desire.

Williams' term is an ancestor to most writers on affect theory, and perhaps most closely anticipates a term later coined by Susanna Paasonen with the generative phrasing "affective formation," describing the entanglements between people, media, and feelings. Paasonen defines an affective formation as "the contingent ordering, patterning, and shaping of sensation that come[s] about in encounters between people, apps, devices, and services" (10-11). I would clarify that all media, even the old stalwarts of film and television, lying outside of Paasonen's particular focus on online media technologies, are part of this "shaping of sensation." The transmedial similarities welding them together are part of the drive of this project, tying prestige cinema to digital hookup cultures to documentaries to film festivals. Studying affective formations is part of an effort to get to the heart of how, in Sara Ahmed's words, "emotions *do things,*" how they "mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective" (119). Emotions, for the case studies collected here, suture the viewer/user in relationship with media objects and are the staging ground for matters of cultural rumination and transformation.

Nostalgia– to feel nostalgic– is an affective formation, one that is bittersweet, chasing a diminishing or fading past– often materialized as an encounter with sacred objects, media texts, places– and lavishing it with sentimental attachment. When applied to LGBTQ culture, nostalgia becomes not just an emotion but also a repository of tropes, references, and ideas, shared amongst diffuse community, wherein binding to this archive as a means of "feeling queer" becomes its own mission. Steven Shaviro describes media as "machines for generating affect," referencing both the mechanical power of media to instigate emotional responses (calling on Linda Williams' original exploration of filmic body genres) as well as media's implication as a cog within broader networks of affective relating.

Demarcating a transmedial genre I term *LGBTQ nostalgia media,* my dissertation traces the cultural work of imagined fantasies of the queer past, as they communicate a key language of community identity. I will be focusing on three uses of LGBTQ nostalgia media, their capacities to *pleasure,* to *remember,* and to *mediate.* In *pleasuring,* they function as a pleasure structure formulating queer attachments to the past and lending them a formal character implicated within an erotics of human embodiment. I'm interested in how bodies and sensation are used as the vehicles and symbolic ornament of LGBTQ nostalgic pleasure, and this dissertation endeavors to understand the currents of that affective relay through embodiment. In *remembering,* they act as cultural archives that document and represent the past within the context of media economies and attempt to lend a weighted stability to histories frequently conceived affectively, as the ephemeral transmission of feeling and coded semiotics. LGBTQ nostalgia media also *mediates,* in multiple senses of the word, both enacting in mediated form but also reconciling tensions and mixed feelings amidst diverse LGBTQ media publics. These mixed feelings may be about the arcs of LGBTQ history, the definitions and politics of queer community, solidarities between

LGBTQ identities, intersectional complications to gender and sexual identities, changing avenues of media consumption, and more, but all are united in their appeal to the past as an imaginary aggregate that bestows value and frames contemporary experience.[2] An analysis of a public yearning made tangible through media, this dissertation focuses on the currents of feeling that express a need for such a category as LGBTQ nostalgia media.

My chapters focus on clusters of LGBTQ nostalgia media that uniquely gesture to points of tension and conflict in the queer historical imagination, evidencing the ways nostalgia is multi-faceted for LGBTQ people. Nostalgia is a bittersweet affective formation, one that registers the literal loss of an object, era, or way of life, while simultaneously insisting on the very alive persistence of sentimental feeling for the object. As Aubrey Anable writes in her study of affect in video games, "Affect has the possibility of forming counterpublics around the cultural expression of underrepresented feelings" (xviii). Within LGBTQ nostalgia media the expressed feelings I analyze may not be technically "underrepresented"– in fact, I aim to show how constitutive they are to vast areas of LGBTQ media circulation. But they are feelings communicated *under the threat of expiration*, the threat itself a historical echo of the fragile transmissions and silences of queer history. LGBTQ nostalgia media hosts publics of tension and conflict laced in the languages of pleasure and remembrance.

[2] In focusing on media's capacity to stage the pacification of cultural tensions, I am building off of work by Stuart Hall and his analysis of "the double movement of containment and resistance" in popular culture (348). Hall's definition of popular culture "treats the domain of cultural forms and activities as a constantly changing field…it looks at the relations which constantly structure this field into dominant and subordinate formations. It looks at the *process* by which these relations of dominance and subordination are articulated." My interpretation of Hall's transformations of power in the staging ground of popular culture foregrounds affect and feeling in those very transformations, as part of the "antagonistic and unstable elements" in "cultural forms" (356).

1.2 Rhetorics of Nostalgia in Queer Studies

In a 1995 issue of the journal *Cultural Studies,* sociologist Stuart Tannock attempts the intimidating task of theorizing nostalgia writ large across the humanities. Tannock defines nostalgia as working to create:

> a positively evaluated past world in response to a deficient present world. The nostalgic subject turns to the past to find/construct sources of identity, agency, or community, that are felt to be lacking, blocked, subverted or threatened in the present. The 'positively evaluated' past is approached as a source for something now perceived to be missing; but it need not be thought of as a time of general happiness, peacefulness, stability, or freedom. Invoking the past, the nostalgic subject may be involved in escaping or invading, in critiquing, or in mobilizing to overcome the present experience of loss of identity, lack of agency, or absence of community.

Tannock's definition provides a helpful sense of the cultural work initiated by nostalgic feeling. Admirably open to variety, Tannock defends nostalgia against its more paranoid framings– as a resource strictly for conservatives to remember "the good old days"– and instead points to the existence "of multiple and different nostalgias among individuals and communities" (454). In the fourth chapter of this dissertation, I point to the specificity of trans nostalgia re-writing traditional archives of gay nostalgia, reminding us of the inherent variability of experience within the LGBTQ umbrella that in turn uses strategies of nostalgia with variability.

When "invoking the past," the past is put to work as an archive of symbols applied to the concerns of the present. This understanding of nostalgia holds as a central truth that nostalgia is always as much about the present as it is about the past. In this way, assessing nostalgic visions for the "accuracy" they present is not the primary significance to be found in studying them.

Documenting and accounting for different nostalgias, Tannock writes, assists in "opening up a space in the historical record, of recuperating a set of practices and discourses" of how a community desires a history, a crucial dynamic in an overall cultural profile (462). I understand nostalgia as housing a particular mode of affective communication about time and history, directing desire along currents of belonging that are coincident with the cultural memories and values of particular groups. This allows us to analyze how nostalgia operates as a particular form of social language within a public sphere. This dissertation studies "LGBTQ nostalgia publics" as operationalized through the affective work of media worlds.[3]

I believe nostalgia to be an unruly affective formation, one heavily dependent on the immediate contexts of its becoming and thereby resistant to any steadfast rules of its ethical or political nature. At the same time, queer studies scholarship has frequently found cause to profile and debate the overall philosophy of being queerly nostalgic in the context of LGBTQ life and history. These philosophical backgrounds inform how nostalgia is felt, accessed, and negotiated as an affective formation, and in the following paragraphs I endeavor to illuminate those grounding principles.

The utopian strains of queer theory have often found reason to validate nostalgia as an essential tool of political resistance. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), José Esteban Muñoz boldly declares "The present is not enough" (27), embracing futurity and the concept of queerness as an endless horizon, "a structured and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" (1). It is a call to face towards the future in a manner that "staves off the ossifying effects of neoliberal ideology" (22).

[3] In this analysis I am following the discussion of "publics" elucidated by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner in their essay "Sex in Public" (1998). Berlant and Warner note the queer world-making potentials of "every cultural form, be it a novel or an after-hours club or an academic lecture." All offer the ability to "index a virtual social world…[that] allow[s] for the concretization of a queer counterpublic" (558).

Although it is frequently billed as a manifesto for the queer future, *Cruising Utopia* is just as much about harnessing the sacred powers of the queer past.

Muñoz locates his "modality of queer utopianism…within a historically specific nexus of cultural production, before, around and slightly after the Stonewall rebellion of 1969" (3). He goes on to write about Stonewall as "the birth of the modern gay and lesbian movement and the initial eruption that led to a formalizing and formatting of gay and lesbian identities." Muñoz waxes nostalgic himself, abstractly, towards a revolution he was too removed by time to partake in:

> Before this bold rebellion there was another moment in which the countercultural map was perhaps a bit queerer, which is to say more expansive and including of various structures of feeling and habits of being that the relatively restrictive categories of gay and lesbian identities are incapable of catching (115).

Drawing himself from Raymond Williams' concept "structure of feeling," Muñoz advocates attending to ephemera and affect as a way to "see these ghosts…that bring life to a lost experience," the lost experience of historical queers (42). I would suggest that in his model of futurity, Muñoz offers the clearest call for the politically generative work of a *queer* nostalgia. What he describes as "queer utopian memory" acknowledges the profound usefulness of the past in "transmitting its vision of utopia across generational divides" (34). A nostalgic memory structure, Muñoz's framing of a queer utopian memory is fruitful in its capacity to see beyond foreclosures of gender and sexual identity, and the assimilationist politics of homonormativity, which will be discussed in the following section.

In this dissertation I draw a distinction between *queer nostalgia,* which is nostalgia operationalized for political ends in accordance with the defiant rebellion of the word *queer,* and

LGBTQ nostalgia, to account for the more multi-faceted and potentially non-radical work of nostalgic feeling in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer worlds. A queer nostalgist might find inspiration in a murky past that suggests fundamentally different organizations of society in gender and sexual understanding. LGBTQ nostalgia includes these desires, but folds in a more restricted search for origins and ancestors to sexual and gender minorities more or less as they exist today. Media marketplaces are more prone to seizing upon the latter, in their capacity to fold demographic niches into an existing capitalistic system. Queer analog pleasure, a sense of the unfolding sensuous potential found hidden in the past, is one discursive fantasy that is usually hemmed in by the work of the present (the digital), contemporary means of mediation and access to the past that ambivalently color LGBTQ nostalgia as an affective formation.

Muñoz's work is powerful for its sense of hope and potential it finds within the queer past. This dissertation is full of moments that ring with his same sense of queer utopian discovery: the 1950s underground queer world-making a lost pair of gloves unleashes in *Carol,* the expectations of reckless queer passion attendees hope to find in LGBTQ film festivals. The unexpected uses of a peach in *Call Me by Your Name,* or of archival homoerotic fiction in Malic Amalya's *Flyhole* (2018). Nostalgia can be understood as an *opening* affective formation, one that stimulates a theory of gendered and sexualized personhood that is validated by queer ancestors past and present.

Scholars of nostalgia and memory on a more undifferentiated basis, not rooted in specific subcultures and identities, have similarly described the generative political work of sentimental attachments to the past. Writing about antique photography, Michelle Henning threads the needle between structures of feeling and the utilities of media, noting the inseparable nature of technological adaptation and social relations. Discussing the continuing rush to focus on the

"new" and the resulting disempowerment of older attachments and feelings, she writes that "obsolescent media become politically significant in a society where newness has become linked to social distinction and dominance" (57). The continued presence and use of the obsolete in this kind of world can be used to "smash this ideology of progress," an act of revolution Muñoz's queer utopian memory strategies would support (59). In *The Mnemonic Imagination: Remembering as Creative Practice* (2012), Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering similarly frame nostalgia as a powerful tool for activating political change:

> Longing, albeit in varying degrees, can be motivated by lack in the present and lead to a sense of loss, but in recognising the relationship between an unregainable past and a deficient present, the grounds for change are prepared. The past becomes a reference point for critique of the present and, as a result of this, for possible transformation in the future (118).

For these writers, nostalgia is an affective formation that can produce or enflame ways of being that are oppositional and revolutionary. Muñoz's archive of queer artists in *Cruising Utopia* is accomplishing this precise goal of carrying forward a torch of queer utopian memory to "smash this ideology of progress" that corrupts queerer political visions.

In other work by Keightley and Pickering, the authors exhibit a paranoid vision of nostalgia's power to uphold repressive social orders of the past. In their study of nostalgia in advertising, the authors focus on the British bread company Hovis for its perfect reflection of archetypal normative family values, "a sense of social coordination and integration…extending from the nuclear family to the broader society" that "delivers a romanticised interpretation of the past and an essentialised conception of everyday life built around unquestioned gender roles and relations" ("Retrotyping and the Marketing of Nostalgia," 86-87). This sense of critical suspicion

around the work of nostalgia– resisting complication, aiding dominant agendas of social control– is reflected in the work of queer theorists writing on nostalgia as well. As will be explored in the second chapter of this dissertation on public sex cultures, Samuel R. Delany's classic text *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999)– despite being, in my view, a thoroughly nostalgic tribute to the sexual freedom of cruising in New York City in the mid-to-late twentieth century– uses "nostalgic" itself as a dirty word, as a superficial dismissal of reality.

Heather Love has written perhaps the most thorough suggestion of an anti-nostalgic political platform in queer theoretical writing, though one still informed by a respect for and immersion within the queer past. In *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007), Love argues for a model of queer historicity that invests in "taking care of the past without attempting to fix it" and "not rely[ing] on the past to secure the stability of the present" (43). Describing her "decision to look on the dark side," Love writes:

> contemporary critics tend to describe the encounter with the past in idealizing terms…In attempting to construct a positive genealogy of gay identity, queer critics and historians have often found themselves at a loss about what to do with the sad old queens and long-suffering dykes who haunt the historical record. They have disavowed the difficulties of the queer past, arguing that our true history has not been written. If critics do admit the difficulties of the queer past, it is most often in order to redeem them. By including queer figures from the past in a positive genealogy of gay identity, we make good on their suffering, transforming their shame into pride after the fact (31–32).

Recalling the aforementioned work by Stuart Tannock, I do not believe nostalgia to be an exclusively "positive" emotion, made up of a bittersweet negotiation of feeling. In a LGBTQ nostalgic imaginary, we valorize and embrace the paths of "sad old queens and long-suffering

dykes" even as we weep with them. But nonetheless, an exclusively "positive genealogy" is what Love fears in relation to the past. For Love, nostalgia frequently works as a deceptive romanticization, glossing over the immense sadness of the closet. The same tyrannical present Muñoz sees the past coming to remedy under Love's reading creates the past as a hollowed-out shadow of what it once was, re-written under the codes of a corrupted "pride." Love views the optimism, positivity, and pleasure of some queer nostalgia framings as nothing but potentially harmful mis-recognitions of the past aimed at bolstering homonormative regimes. Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, in *The Freezer Door* (2020), her work of creative non-fiction about the transformation of queer public cultures during the twenty-first century, would agree when she writes "Nostalgia for the pre-gentrified time or place or space might be one of the worst forms of gentrification" (148).

Just as Muñoz's romanticized visions of queer utopian memory find purchase in the pages of this dissertation, so do I agree with Love that it can work as a dangerous stabilizer of partial truths unavoidably linked to the prevailing power dynamics of LGBTQ media worlds. The films I analyze in the canon of LGBTQ prestige cinema both focus on wealthy white characters– this undoubtedly reveals a lot about who the target audiences and prevailing creative voices for each are, and the limitations on which stories are ultimately told. The effect is an understanding of LGBTQ history through a filter of whiteness and wealth. The similarly fraught environment of an LGBTQ film festival reflects similar concessions and regurgitated power dynamics. Yet, what most commands my interest is the tantalizing pull of transcendence lingering in both. Just as nostalgia oscillates between past and present, I believe its affective color is similarly double-sided: bittersweet and borrowing from affects both light and dark.

Muñoz and Love epitomize these warring instincts: a romantic orientation towards what memories of the queer past can do, against a fear of what said romanticizations may lose.

It is tempting to create a totalizing dichotomy between these two schools of queer theoretical thought– Muñoz on one side highlighting nostalgia as a productive force of salvation, Love on the other stressing its manipulative potential to support the status quo. This critical distinction between "good" and "bad" nostalgias similarly structures scholarly literature on nostalgia writ large, most notably in the work of Svetlana Boym. Boym outlines two main types of nostalgia that she terms "the restorative and the reflective." She explains, using the etymology of the word as a guide:

> Restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* (home) and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives on *algia* (the longing itself) and delays the homecoming– wistfully, ironically, desperately…Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalence of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt (13).

Boym uses the central verbs of *restoring* and *reflecting* to articulate the usages of the past invoked by contemporary nostalgias. Broadly, this distinction– whether one is sentimentally attaching to the past in order to restore its truths, or to more abstractly reflect on its passing– has defined much of nostalgia scholarship. Roughly, nostalgia's appearances within the canon of queer studies can be mapped onto this same binary. Heather Love's fears of an uncritical, emptying nostalgia characterizes the affective formation as *restorative,* aimed at emphasizing the powerful's "truths and traditions" about LGBTQ life that often diverge irresponsibly from lived

reality. One could argue Muñoz's framing of nostalgia is restorative as well, with a radical untamed utopianism being the thing that he seeks to *restore* to LGBTQ life. However, queer utopian memory's association with an ephemeral longing that is brutally aware of its own expiration, or in Boym's words tied to "the unrealized dreams of the past and visions of the future that have become obsolete," makes it a more *reflective* form of feeling (10).

However much this mapping makes logical sense, it's worth interrogating as a potential limit upon the complexities of nostalgia as an affective formation. Keightley and Pickering mention the risk of erasure instituted by this binaristic thinking. They write, "In recent rethinking of the concept of nostalgia, there is a tendency to set up, if not binary oppositions within nostalgia, then at least radical separations between psychologically healthy and unhealthy, or politically desirable and undesirable forms of the phenomenon" (134-135). They critique Boym's formation of restorative vs reflective, noting that the sharp divide "obscures the ways in which restorative and reflective forms of nostalgia may interact" (136). In its place, the authors suggest that a framework of nostalgia has to account for ambiguity and ambivalence, "not perceived…as simply a matter of instrumentally deciding between 'good' and 'bad' nostalgias." Nostalgic imaginations, they write, are composed of both "affectively registering loss and temporal displacement *and* imaginatively engaging with the otherness of the past as a locus of possibility and source of aspiration" (137). The aggregate nature of nostalgic desire must be allowed to maintain a complexity that is not easily reduced. Rather, its very ambiguity and ambivalence should be maintained for the most productive sense of what nostalgia *does* as an affective formation. This is especially true when studying nostalgic *media.* The values a media text might individually hold are necessarily complicated by chains of distribution and circulation, to say nothing of the transformations that occur at the point of the user and viewer, re-creating texts

within new frames of reference and experience. The reflecting and restoring labels betray a focus on ontology that the study of media systems necessarily moves beyond. Nevertheless, Boym's formulation taps into a key structuring of nostalgia's social, cultural, and political work. The reflective and restorative paradigms haunt the case studies in the following chapters, and I endeavor to both acknowledge this context and allow for the generative complication suggested by Keightley and Pickering.

Nostalgia itself is a social emotional phenomenon based on the interaction of multiple affects, both positive and negative. I am partial to Muñoz's framing of queer utopian memory as a generative strategy of queer life, but my true fascination in this project is how the chaotic heterogeneity of media, affect, and meaning make both framings of nostalgia notable social effects. For this reason I follow and analyze LGBTQ nostalgia media's power to stage crisis and conversation. Rather than asking what kind of politicized nostalgia a media text inherently represents, I ask "what kinds of ideas and problems does LGBTQ nostalgia media activate *to be worked through*?" Just as the relaunched *Physique Pictorial* immerses its readers in a dual orientation between past and present, so do other LGBTQ nostalgia media texts display multiple affects, ideas, and political-historical loyalties born of nostalgia's inherent friction. These philosophical contexts continue to inform the social function of nostalgia in LGBTQ worlds, but as that dynamic plays out affectively, it is rife with an inherent ambivalence and indecision between multiple forms of feeling. Ambivalence is the fulcral grounding of LGBTQ nostalgia as an affective formation, largely because of its indebtedness to a social discourse that made LGBTQ nostalgia media an ascendant media genre of the 21st century: homonormativity.

1.3 Homonormativity and Ambivalence

On Sunday April 7th 2019, the LGBTQ Victory Fund– a political action committee devoted to supporting the election of openly queer governmental officials in the United States– held what was called the "National Champagne Brunch" at the JW Marriott Hotel in Washington D.C. The fund relayed hopeful cheers and confidence to prospective guests, exclaiming in an advertisement "Enjoy big-name speakers, great food and bottomless bubbles as we talk about the LGBTQ candidates who will move equality forward in 2019 and beyond" (LGBTQ Victory Fund). One of the speakers at this event was Pete Buttigieg, the former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, often dubbed "Mayor Pete," who a week later would formally announce his candidacy for the presidency of the United States, the first openly gay man to seek the Democratic Party's nomination. At the time of the champagne brunch, Buttigieg had been a highly buzzed-about potential candidate, with heavy media attention ornamenting his campaign. This speech made national news, with many media outlets focusing on Buttigieg's specific call-out of then Vice President, and fellow Indiana resident, Mike Pence. Speaking on Pence's affiliations with homophobic hate groups and conversion therapy, Buttigieg said "If you have a problem with who I am, your problem is not with me. Your quarrel, sir, is with my creator." This quote was frequently isolated as a headline, including for CBS News (Tillett). But rather than focusing on this attention-grabbing moment, I find in Mayor Pete's "sermon at the brunch" a notable historical positioning pitched through emotional rhetoric that is implicit in all acts of queer enunciation. His temporal positioning, as opposed to the nostalgia-laden wistfulness of the Bob Mizer Foundation, or Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia,* speaks of an exhausted gratitude for the present as the primary affective container of LGBTQ life. Pete Buttigieg, as a notable popular representation of centrist gay masculinity eager to work within a conventional socio-political

structure, is a conduit for the affective properties of homonormativity. This illuminates queer theory's feared political configuration of banal assimilationist tedium as a pointed source of *anti-nostalgia,* and thus deeply embedded in the networks of affective communication regarding LGBTQ nostalgia writ large. Homonormativity's frequent deployment of anti-nostalgia is a structuring *other* in contrast to the work of LGBTQ nostalgia media publics.

In the video of the speech that circulated online, Buttigieg's voice is backed by the faint tinkling of plates and silverware as service staff hustle to provide the promised bottomless bubbles, an unintentional reminder of the working-class lives just off-screen, often un-represented by the elite strata of the Democratic Party. In Mayor Pete's remarks, he takes advantage of his notable historical first– the grounded pragmatic *reality* of his campaign for President– to institute a timeline configuring his podium as a position of absolute present, with a preceding series of events that led him there, and a hopeful future lined with champagne and midday breakfast food. He begins by noting the accomplishments of recently elected LGBTQ public officials, including Lori Lightfoot, the lesbian mayor of Chicago, and Jared Polis, the gay governor of Colorado. Taking on the specter of temporal change in optimistic but quietly fearful terms, Buttigieg remarks "Nothing is more common to the American political experience than watching things change quickly, for better and for worse, and very often for better." In stark divergence to the nostalgic strains I've been exploring here, his speech details a series of "back thens" of institutionalized homophobias and brutal self-denial, his own personal self-acceptance narrativized as coincident with the rising national tolerance of LGBTQ rights. He says to a captivated crowd:

> Back then I would have believed you could be gay, or you could be married, but not both. Not where I lived. That if you were gay you could be out, or you could run for office, but

not both. That in our country you could live with a same-sex spouse, or you could serve in the military, but not both.

Noting "It's amazing what's changed, just in my young lifetime," Buttigieg strikes an optimistic tone that sees the present and impending future as the remedies to an unappealing past (Victory Fund). Buttigieg outlines "back then" as a cave of repression and homophobia, defined by restrictive binary choices that fearfully create a homonormative present as the only safe option for a livable LGBTQ life.

The future that has come to rescue this homophobic history via Mayor Pete's invective is structured by three entry-points: 1) marriage, 2) political office-seeking, and 3) military service. While Buttigieg does touch on trans rights and other agendas of progress yet to be achieved, the hope that colors his speech is created through this narrow triangulation of mild assimilationist comfort, one understanding itself chiefly through a normative rubric of romantic and sexual relating, over a bedrock of patriotic national identity. Lisa Duggan refers to this political configuration as homonormativity, "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, de-politicized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (50). Muñoz refers to it as gay pragmatism, a political investment in "an assimilation that is forever over the rainbow" (55).

Buttigieg's speech is a mix of hopefulness and fear, noting all the good the present and future can bring while summoning the past as intimidating shadows that one better not return to. Previously cited affect theorist Susanna Paasonen echoes Mayor Pete's anti-nostalgia when writing about the emotional bent of LGBTQ people towards the past:

> LGBTQ+ communities are…unlikely to consider the good old days preceding the 1960s counterculture as a really great time, given that these involved the imminent threat of incarceration and state violence, diagnoses of mental disorder allowing for medical inquiry, the social enforcement of a closeted life, and the corresponding devastation of social isolation (146).

In a text where she also dismisses nostalgia as "a toxic pursuit," Paasonen's work configures nostalgia as the domain of the powerful, viewing the past as the resources for a conditional "authenticity" that is ultimately the authentic only through the terms of white normative patriarchy, and therefore attachment to a loss rarely articulated by "racialized, feminist, and queer" voices, who lacked the comfortable patriarchal past to begin with (145). Paasonen is writing in a cultural moment shook by the rallying cry of U.S. President Donald Trump, "Make America Great Again," that foregrounded nostalgia within the mainstream political imagination as a dangerous tool of white supremacist mobilization. The presidential election of 2016 displayed fundamental reasons to fear the corrosive and toxic powers nostalgic feeling can activate.

I previously outlined the vitalities queer communities find in queer utopian memory and nostalgic feeling, along with the rival position articulated by theorists like Heather Love that nostalgia too quickly erases everything unpleasant about the past. Homonormativity as a socio-political development is the world reflective queer nostalgias aim to rebel against, fighting the misrecognition of the past as the feared husk of bad times that has, thankfully, created a present worth celebrating. Homonormativity holds tight to this present with all its might, following a neoliberal logic of privatization and de-radicalization as the promise of safety and comfort in a

volatile, frightening world. It is a political dynamic expressed through a vernacular of affect, concretized in a structure of feeling.

Raymond Williams' aforementioned concept, which attempts to concretize the ambient work of affect into legible socio-cultural institutions with political directionality, was introduced in his text *Marxism and Literature* with a baked-in sense of the power, competition, and instability fueling cultural development. Structures of feeling do not emerge as monoliths of conditioned feeling, but rather in competition against one another, the signs of an irreducible cultural heterogeneity. In a related section on "epochal analysis," Williams writes that the residual, fading social practices of the past, while they become increasingly antique against a dominant culture "are nevertheless lived and practised on the basis of the residue– cultural as well as social– of some previous social and cultural institution of formation" (122). He goes on to note that the development of a dominant culture's hegemony "is always uneven," defined by pockets of resistance and areas unclaimed. I would suggest, then, that homonormativity, with its brunch celebrations of modest assimilationist goals, is a dominant structure of feeling in the LGBTQ worlds of the United States. The social vitality of LGBTQ nostalgia often takes the form of a residual retort to the contemporary dominant, but just as frequently is it subject to the incorporating function of cultural hegemony. Homonormativity can be said to be a *cause* of LGBTQ nostalgic publics, or at least one of the primary instigators of nostalgic feeling for a time other than the present. As will be discussed in the following chapters, past eras are evoked in motion pictures precisely because they inflame sensory passions that might feel more deflated, reduced to an organizable market niche, in the contemporary moment. Rebellious sexual practices, such as the cruising cultures explored in chapter three, out of step with the polite buttoned-down ethos of a Mayor Pete, continue in opposition.

Lisa Duggan's original framework of homonormativity in *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (2004) used as its principal case study the Log Cabin Republicans, gay conservatives advocating for a homosexual polish to the typical conservative platform. Her theoretical intentions with the term were broader than just the cultural work of Republicans alone, aimed instead at what she perceived as a broader push towards privatization and assimilationist rhetoric within gay and lesbian politics. The term has caught on as an increasingly broad citational point of reference to a whole host of issues registering with these themes, yet in the near twenty years since its origination not much work has been done to clarify the term's application for a socio-cultural landscape in the United States with same-sex marriage legalized across the country and new benchmarks for LGBTQ "normalization" seemingly in each passing year.

Sharif Mowlabocus in *Interrogating Homonormativity: Gay Men, Identity, and Everyday Life* (2021) attempts to refine the conversation, understanding homonormativity as:

> no longer solely an outlook adopted by a cadre of centre-right non-heterosexual people and organisations. It increasingly also serves as an *ideological fulcrum,* operating at the centre of a myriad set of relationships between queer people and the heteronormative mainstream. (30)

First providing us a generative pre-history to Duggan's tactful coining of the term– showing homonormativity's roots in queer theoretical writing by John D'Emilio, Michael Warner, Rosemary Hennessy, and others– Mowlabocus further demonstrates the degree to which homonormativity is often over-estimated in scholarship, said to possess a monolithic control of LGBTQ culture when, in reality, there are many queer lives that continue to be untouched by even this regrettable stabilizer. A critical fixation on the influence of homonormativity often

betrays a focus on metropolitan and urbane queer populations, as well as discounts the ever-complicating factors of gender, religion, race, socio-economic status, region, and nation, to move beyond an exclusively Western perspective. Communities dominated by rural evangelical Christianity have little evidence of the reign of the homonormative that so terrifies queer theorists.

Nonetheless homonormativity does have a real and distinct social presence, one familiar as "a method by which governments, private companies, and the free market can promote their own progressive credentials" (29). The displays of "LGBTQ pride" I analyze in the fifth chapter on film festivals attend to these demonstrations, but what truly interests me is the homonormative as "an ideological fulcrum," as an undeniable cultural force demanding navigation and consideration by the people facing the intimidating mélange of LGBTQ subjectification in the contemporary United States. Homonormativity is not a sweeping cultural era, but it is a code of values, with its own model LGBTQ citizen in tow, that calls out to queer people with its attendant allure– safety, security, champagne at brunch– and its subsequent trades– a history of radical action, solidarity beyond the strict confines of a privatizing imperative, a sense of queer's transformative potential. Homonormativity can't help but be felt by many with ambivalence– even Mowlabocus admits that his work criticizing it was in fact enabled by homonormativity's efforts to legitimize and secure queer studies within university curricula.[4] This dissertation has benefitted from the same institutional processes. To perform a classic neurotic anxiety loop of the relatively privileged 21st century queer: I enjoy a basic,

[4] Mowlabocus writes "…whether I like it or not, I *do* have an investment in homonormativity, or at the very least, in the consequences of homonormativity. By this I mean that I have actively benefitted from the rhetoric of assimilation, normativity and equality that homonormativity promulgates. I would run a mile over broken glass before aligning myself with some of homonormativity's most notable spokesmen…but I cannot ignore the fact that the freedoms and rights I enjoy today as a middle-class gay man are inseparable from the political aims of homonormativity, which have played a central role in securing such rights, and which continue to broker the terms and conditions upon which I, and countless other gay men, have been granted a degree of acceptance" (3).

context-dependent sense of safety throughout my very queer life most of the time. I also enjoy the regularity of LGBTQ representation on television and in movies, and my ability to see such media safely and easily. Yet I can't help but look back like Lot's wife and wonder what has been sacrificed or lost. To even feel this way is to tacitly admit a level of comfort and privilege not every queer person can claim, so shouldn't I just be content in gratitude for what the world presents and stop complaining? And yet…

The crisis instituted by homonormativity is in many ways emblematic of larger changes to the conceptualization and lived experience of identity in an era of neoliberalism. Meredith Heller's work on *RuPaul's Drag Race* smartly attends to this crossover when she discusses the show's deployment of neoliberal identity politics, contextualizing "certain capacities of self as valuable 'cards' in a commercial market" (134). This experience of reduction is a common one in homonormative media, which dovetails with the same privatizing instincts as neoliberalism. Homonormativity sees the reduction of intangible, amorous, or affective qualities of sexual self-knowledge into "cards" endowed with financial value in a capitalistic system. Sarah Banet-Weiser's work on brands follows a similar line of inquiry towards a broader cultural diagnosis. In her book *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (2012), Banet-Weiser links a widespread cultural desire for feelings of authenticity to the escalating social entanglements of consumer citizenship, where "brand relationships have increasingly become cultural contexts for everyday living, individual identity, and affective relationships" (4). Nostalgia media locates such authenticity in the past.

Feeling her way through the tumultuous push and pull of this created dichotomy– with the heavily-branded commodity at one end and the elusive "authentic" at the other– Banet-Weiser lands on ambivalence as a principally significant emotional state of relating and identity

in the 21st century, one I find uniquely important as a contextual marker to the work of LGBTQ nostalgia media. She writes:

> Rather than generalize all branding strategies as egregious effects of today's market, and think wistfully of a bygone world that was truly authentic, it is more productive to situate brand cultures in terms of their ambivalence, where both economic imperatives and 'authenticity' are expressed and experienced simultaneously (5-6).

In this passage, the hunt for "authenticity" reads as its own kind of nostalgic reverie, equally distant from the real and responding to the insufficiencies of the present as LGBTQ nostalgia publics. Ambivalence becomes a kind of coping strategy, with brand cultures themselves as the mediated objects of proof. It is in these affective relationships with the world around us that that cultural ambivalence finds itself "expressed and experienced simultaneously," as a kind of qualified attachment. Lauren Berlant notes the complicated work of ambivalence, describing it as "the affective copy" of disappointment, "where we work out our conflicting inclinations towards what kind of closeness and distance we want, think we want, and can bear our object to have" (13). This conflicted and gradual feeling-out of competing drives makes ambivalence not a simple "failure of a relation" (Berlant 2) but rather, as Banet-Weiser clarifies in her commentary on Berlant's theory, "potentially innovative, not a foreclosure but…a possible opening" (219). As unsteady an emotion as it may be, ambivalence is a productive ground of creation and regeneration, and an understandable orientation for LGBTQ nostalgia media, where freedoms and authenticities are proferred at the cost, often, of increased discrimination and a more openly hostile world. Nostalgia publics and the rise of nostalgic cultural desires make sense as the end result of an age of trademarked authenticity. But what demands significant scholarly

investigation, as the case studies of this dissertation will demonstrate, is when those nostalgic affects are implicated in the same processes of neoliberal construction.

Scholars writing on homonormativity would do well to feel out the affective grounds of ambivalence as signature tone for the navigation of queer life in the 21st century. As Mowlabocus writes in his call for deeper nuance on homonormativity:

> We are ignorant of how lesbians and gay men (but also other non-heterosexual folk) accommodate, resist, and otherwise negotiate their lives in relation to the ideas, opinions, arguments and compromises that can be collected under the term 'homonormative' (31). [5]

Honoring the agency of LGBTQ people to "accommodate, resist, and negotiate" isn't just a means of refusing the tendency to see homonormative media making everyone homonormative zombies in a top-down pattern of subjectification. It's also a way of staying with the mess and complex affective work of ambivalence, where one appreciates the rise of a gay presidential candidate but wonders how queer life's renegade beauty and progressive ethics of coalition are being impacted simultaneously. Media is the staging ground for these kinds of negotiations, as LGBTQ media spectators and users turn to nostalgia media to weigh what Jodi Brooks describes as "the losses and gains of inhabiting privileged social institutions and cultural forms" (117). Katharina Niemeyer, in her edited anthology on media and nostalgia, confirms the foundational role of ambivalence to nostalgia in describing "the eternal tension of vanishing and returning" such mediated relationships perform (13).

At the moment of this writing in Summer 2023 we have witnessed June's Pride Month, when private companies and major institutions are pushed to demonstrate affiliation with and

[5] Mowlabocus' trepidation to fully extend this line of thoughts to other members of LGBTQ worlds is emblematic of the book's titular emphasis on gay male worlds. But indeed, as I will argue in a later section, part of the cultural work of homonormativity is to gesture towards a gay male default for queer populations writ large. Thus, even for lesbians, trans people, bisexual, pansexual, intersex, asexual, and other queer communities, there is a felt effect of the values and strategies of the homonormative public sphere that demands negotiation.

support for the LGBTQ community. Such displays are frequent objects for critical interrogation as the propagation of homonormativity. Yet, at the time of this writing, the displays of corporate pride so frequently utilized as examples of the flat fake "acceptance" of a homonormative moment are, even in their humble negotiated presence, being chased out of the public sphere. In April 2023, Anheuser-Busch, the brewing company behind several global beer brands including Budweiser, Michelob, and Stella Artois, was met with vitriol from conservative activists in response to a social media promotion partnership Bud Light made with trans influencer Dylan Mulvaney. Bowing to pressure, Anheuser-Busch CEO Brendan Whitworth issued a press release of equivocating weakness, writing "We never intended to be part of a discussion that divides people." Two advertising executives involved with the promotion were put on leave (Beer), while Mulaveny accused the company of callously abandoning her (Sforza).

This event seemingly set a tone, as the arrival of LGBTQ Pride several months later in June prompted similar clashes between the corporate virtue-signaling status quo and resilient anti-LGBTQ activism. Two major corporations known for Pride representation in graphics, promotions, and display– Starbucks and Target– both faced severe intimidation from conservative activists and news networks, most frequently articulated in the language of "grooming" underage children into sexual acts and identities. Target officially announced a rollback of their Pride-themed merchandising (Riedel), while Starbucks' abandoning of Pride iconography remains an unconfirmed allegation from distressed LGBTQ employees (Factora). Writing in *Fast Company,* reporter Jeff Beer described the conservative activism trend as "a broader 'Get Woke, Go Broke' campaign against corporations and companies that exhibit anything resembling progressive policies."

These developments in many ways confirm the volatile, non-linear developments of cultural flows, and the un-fixedness that comes with any suggestion of socio-cultural "progress." The Victory Brunch might be a sign of concession to a centerist political agenda for LGBTQ politics, but controversies like these make even that mild celebration seem unstable. Sarah Banet-Weiser calls the corporate display of activism like Pride "corporate social responsibility," a genre of outreach very much defined by "safe politics." She writes, "When a political issue becomes mainstream, it has the potential to become part of a brand" (148). The actions of Anheuser-Busch, Starbucks, and Target indicate companies making choices in a pressurized discourse with politics that had previously been considered safe. As Jeff Beer writes about Bud Light, the company had previously featured Pride advertising for seven years without vocal protest. LGBTQ politics are rendered newly controversial or insecure in a swinging climate of shifting energy and vitriol, another kind of re-coordination of affect. Public demonstrations of trans rights, or even just trans personhood, have proved particularly open to discriminatory attacks from the far right, illustrating the unequal division of safety across the LGBTQ community. While LGBTQ nostalgia media publics have frequently used the past as a gateway to imagining more radical times against a commodified presence, recent political phenomena remind queer worlds of the treacherous and eternal co-existence of "the past" as a hateful conservative imaginary threatening to turn back the clock on hardly-won rights. This dynamic is perhaps best crystalized in the Supreme Court's 2023 decision in the case *303 Creative LLC v. Elenis,* rolling back civil rights protections for LGBTQ people against discrimination by private businesses. Perhaps nostalgia's role as the binding agent for an imaginary public is not only about an obsolescent radicalness, but also a reminder of the long, slow, less-glamorous solidarity

and resistance of queers who have seen all of this before and nevertheless persisted in their strategies of survival and world-making.

Homonormativity is an industrial strategy embedded in the work of media production and distribution. Its resulting emotions for queers– the bland, often cringe-worthy sense of diminished queerness– are affective drivers pushing queer worlds further apart. Homonormativity is an aesthetic category and cultural register defining aspects of LGBTQ life in the 21st century, but its presence is not all-consuming, with political turbulence rendering even its meager comforts insecure, and augmenting the distressed ambivalence of queer lives. To say nothing of the consistent fears and violences occurring to queer people outside the hyped safety of urbane homonormative lives, and violences disproportionately increasing for trans people and queer people of color, homonormativity is complicated by an instability where even its own icons of cringe-inducing corporate bravado, criticized by scholars and theorists since the 1990s, feel subject to a new vulnerability. Homonormativity's bland security is part of the affective life of 21st century queers, yet even here it holds a sense of expiration and collapse.

It is perhaps most instructive, then, to consider homonormativity a partial condition, one navigated amongst other ways of being in the complicated blur of rule, desire, and container that is queer life. Following Sara Ahmed's work in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) of taking the *orientation* in *sexual orientation* seriously, homonormativity could be considered a direction, an affective pattern of relating that in following it "we might acquire our sense of who it is that we are" (20). One orientation is framed ambivalently by the myriad other orientations surrounding it, the other paths we could repeat in the direction of subject and public formation. In the case studies that follow throughout this dissertation, homonormativity is an orientation to be negotiated, processed, and maneuvered via different experiences of nostalgia media. In the

creation of these publics, there is ample room for the complex projection of public feelings that thread a needle between individual queerness and larger public experiences of time and history.

1.4 The Attachment-Archive: LGBTQ Cultural Memory and Nostalgia as a Public Feeling

Theorist Jan Assmann describes cultural memory as a tool of concretizing a group's distinct sense of identity, one that acquires the "capacity to reconstruct" a past linked to a group's present, ultimately in language, tradition, form, and media (130). This "capacity to reconstruct" feels particularly critical for LGBTQ cultures when what exactly is being "reconstructed" has historically been up for debate. Carole S. Vance in her foundational 1989 article arguing for a social constructionist model of sexual identity raised a flag considering the problematic notion of "the queer past," and the ways contemporary LGBTQ people relate to it. She writes, "A common motivator for fans of lesbian and gay history was a desire to reclaim the past and to insist on lesbian and gay visibility in every place and at every time," a powerful desire that led to disappointment when scholars subsequently wrote about queer history "as a variable experience whose boundaries and subjectivity were shaped through complex negotiations between state institutions, individuals, and subcultures" (167). Here, an essentialist model, locating a stable past of LGBTQ ancestors, butts up against an intellectual and activist tradition that finds freedom in, conversely, the lack of stable identities across time. This has long complicated notions of LGBTQ history, scrambling attempts at a definitive canon of cultural memory when traditional assumptions of identity are generatively undercut to consider the queer possibilities lying outside the historical record.

This in-community discord related to *how to* remember the queer past exists within the wake of an unavoidable dearth of resources related to LGBTQ lives in history, challenges that

multiply the further one moves away from traditionally-protected archives of wealthy upper-class white people and Western societies. As Ann Cvetkovich writes "Forged around sexuality and intimacy, and hence forms of privacy and invisibility that are both chosen and enforced, gay and lesbian cultures often leave ephemeral and unusual traces" (*An Archive of Feeling* 8). Through the challenges of these resources, the means of recording and archiving history are generatively bust open to the welcome interference of non-traditional models of remembering.

Scholars in LGBTQ studies have thus endeavored to pinpoint the sources that create transference of historical knowledge within queer worlds. Anamarija Horvat argues for the importance of film and television to the process of constructing a communal past in *Screening Queer Memory: LGBTQ Pasts in Contemporary Film and Television* (2021). Given LGBTQ cultures' distances from the inheritance of tradition between old and young in a biological family structure, a critical form of cultural relay in racial, ethnic, and religious cultural groups, Horvat argues that media about queer cultures and histories circulating within the LGBTQ community bear a comparably larger load of influence in cultural memory transference. Alongside an already ontological instability raised by social construction's challenge to essentialist models of the past, this enormous influence of media further multiplies the kinds of cultural memories utilized as the institution of LGBTQ history.

We *need* these creative historical ancestries, however complicated they stray away from an "objective history," could such a thing ever exist. In Zackary Drucker's short film *At Least You Know You Exist* (2011), one of many media texts discussed later on circulating in the hazy nostalgic space of an LGBTQ film festival, a young trans woman artist (the director) meets an older drag performer and activist Flawless Sabrina, and directs a tribute to her in voice-over: "Because of you, I know I exist." As Ann Cvetkovich describes, for the queer archives of sexual

worlds, “memory becomes a valuable historical resource,” as record and model for how to live a queer/trans life (*An Archive of Feeling* 8). Within this process of reaching out for a history, desire motivates an assembled archive of LGBTQ historical attachments: what do you *want* your queer cultural memory to be? These wants are frequently shaped by existing hierarchies of power and the industrial and material realities of the media worlds called upon to satisfy them, but they nonetheless hinge upon the directing powers of affect in their construction and social effect. I understand nostalgia as a critical node in LGBTQ socio-cultural circulation. Nostalgia functions as the affective consolidation of a cultural memory archive pitched through a distinctly sentimental orientation. For that reason, it is a key language of LGBTQ history and world-making. The place to study LGBTQ nostalgia is in the affectivity around public demonstrations of its feeling. In this project I push past the definition of nostalgia as a personal condition based upon memory and recollection, in recognition of what Stuart Tannock referenced as “multiple and different nostalgias among individuals and communities” (454). The vast hereogeneity of LGBTQ nostalgias stands alongside a system of media production and consolidation that intends to give voice to LGBTQ nostalgia in discursive publics, making the very *publicness* of nostalgia an important quality to emphasize.

The word “nostalgia” merges two Greek roots, “nostos” meaning “return home” and “algia” meaning “longing” (Boym 7-8). A return “home” is complicated in the context of LGBTQ worlds by the aforementioned fault-lines of constructionist vs essentialist histories, and I find these tensions evocative of a critical split in how to frame nostalgia, as either a personal fixation or a broader discourse of public feeling. In the critical work, beside my own, most intent on tackling LGBTQ nostalgia as a trackable entity in media textuality, *Queer Nostalgia in Cinema and Pop Culture* (2014) by Gilad Padva, the “personal” understanding is favored. In his

book, Padva recounts many epochs of specific queer iconicity that generate romantic nostalgia for contemporary populations: the radical undergrounds of the 1960s and 70s, the queer black writers of the Harlem Renaissance, and, as echoed in this introduction by my examples of the Bob Mizer Foundation, the mystique of physique era gay photography. But Padva's major theoretical mission is to frame nostalgia as a personal experience, taking the "return home" of nostalgia as grounds for personal reckonings with the closet and histories of discrimination. Quoting from Elspeth Probyn, a queer theorist with a similar framing of nostalgia as personal recuperation, Padva writes, "In 'queering the past in the present'…queers attempt to rediscover the complicated, non-linear, and surprising intersections of childhood, adulthood, transgression, and the multiplicity of erotic and social manifestations and identifications" (7). The book's opening example of the Edmund White short story "Cinnamon Skin" recalls a character's self-reflection on his own adolescent body from an unknown place in the future, which Padva maps meta-textually onto White's own experiences growing up as a gay man. Padva's framing of queer nostalgia emphasizes the individual in nostalgic attachment, personal memories and the position of adolescence as the troubled grounds comforted by nostalgia's sentimental affect.

As mentioned earlier, and in distinction to Padva, I avoid the term "queer nostalgia" in this study as a way of preserving the politically variable uses of nostalgia that do not always align with the radical ethos of the word queer. But equally so I am interested in a re-frame that moves the consideration of nostalgia away from personal reflection and more towards public social process. Nostalgia's "return home" isn't a singular journey, but rather a process of binding to larger currents of public feeling. In her article on the film *Velvet Goldmine* (dir. Todd Haynes, 1998), Dana Luciano pinpoints *attachment* as the appropriate verbiage for describing queer relationships to history, emphasizing as it does "the relational matrix" that sustains the queer

historiographic mission "to preserve and recreate" (125). She writes, "Attachment marks a site between the psychic and the social, invested in both but proper to neither." Reading *Velvet Goldmine* as a "queer attachment-archive," Luciano outlines the means by which the film "opens history to an imaginative, subjective displacement via an unsanctioned, homoerotically-inflected look at the glam-rock era" (126). The term "attachment-archive," which I borrow throughout the dissertation, suggests an encyclopedic index, gathering the ephemera and debris of queer desires for a past, within the structure of a broad cultural imaginary, forever open to creative reimagining and mediated transformations. Luciano is outlining much of the same queer historiographic project as Ann Cvetkovich in *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003), when she notes the power "of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the context of the texts themselves but the practices that surround their production and reception" (7).

While personal accounts of nostalgia prioritize personal memory and individual experience largely limited to the individual nostalgist, the framing of nostalgia I follow is largely dependent on fabricated connections not born of any direct experience, but rather following the affective allure and subjectivizing promise of attachment-archives.[6] Nostalgia's opening as a public experience allows us to think critically of the cultural work of its subsequent compendium of themes, myths, aesthetics, and calling cards that continue to beguile people even when any genuine relationship to its roots have long since burnt out. In the context of LGBTQ lives,

[6] Elizabeth Freeman similarly explores this phenomenon in queer experimental filmmaking, analyzing Hoang Tan Nguyen's short film *K.I.P.* (2001) wherein "a young man faces a past that may or may not be his" (1). Nguyen's face is visible over a TV monitor that plays vintage gay pornography from the early 1980s, positioning him as a "mourning and lusting spectator who seems to want to have sex with history– with dead men, with men older than he, with an era and place barred by both linear time and racial politics." Freeman goes on to write that Nguyen is removed from his sexual fantasy not just by time but by racial categories of power as well, the Asian Nguyen perhaps outside of the desirability implicit in the "pre-AIDS white urban gay male scene" the pornographic video celebrates (13). Here the work of LGBTQ nostalgia media is rooted not in the matching of personal experience or identity to a narrative of temporal development, but rather a more boundless attempt at historio-affective connection across boundaries, a lustful submersion into a larger cultural aggregate.

attachment-archives are a vital node in the overall subject formation of queer identities– "because of you, I know I exist" – even if the rippled transformations of actually "knowing" the beloved attachment across time grow more and more remediated. My description of the desire-generating work of the attachment-archive has much in common with what Shaka McGlotten terms virtuality. Virtuality, he writes, "helps to name the incipient social and affective worlds– modes of encounter, material configurations, emotional possibilities– that queer publics create, nourish, and sustain" (8). Complicating nostalgia from a personal attachment to this broader form of virtual queer public attends to the complex work of media to facilitate community identities and a canon of sentimentality.

Call Me by Your Name, the 1980s-set gay romance that will be explored in the first chapter, is a perfect example of a text formulating an ambient cultural nostalgia in conversation with an attachment-archive. Outfitted in the iconography of Ancient Rome, *Call Me by Your Name* utilizes an attachment-archive of classicism, frequently appealing to gay men, even as such an archive seems to have little relation to its immediate main characters Elio and Oliver.[7] It hangs as an aesthetic, one likely enjoyed by the gay male artists creating the film, and its audiences, but not depicted as a specific personal nostalgic passion recognized by the main characters. Rather, the film's reflection upon and immersion within an attachment-archive of gay classicism communicates an aesthetic of gay nostalgia as broader public discourse. The film's abundance of antiquity acts as a register of queer social reference, evocative of Cvetkovich's assertion that "publics are formed in and through cultural archives" (*An Archive of Feeling,* 9).

[7] Classicism's ties to the making of gay male worlds is explored by Scot Bravmann in *Queer Fictions of the Past: History, Culture, and Difference* (1997). Focusing particularly on the myths and allures of Ancient Greece in the Western gay male imagination, Bravmann notes the use of "ancient Greece as the raw material for fashioning new possibilities for homosexual existence" (49), dating at least as far back as the scholarly work of John Addington Symons in the late nineteenth century (47).

Any public is heavily impacted by the inherent structures of power and privilege surrounding membership and the articulation of a distinct social voice in media. "LGBTQ" as an acronymic construction is an inherently coalitional public, merging the political and social needs of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender people, and those of various queer gender and sexual identities into an aggregate, a move of social organization directly rooting from the efforts of political activists across the history of the LGBTQ rights movement(s). However different individual queer identities across the rainbow are, with specific experiences and worlds tailored to their own kind, "LGBTQ" is still a conjoined public entity with imposing institutionalization, from academic departments to civil rights centers to an organizational tab for media on streaming services like Netflix. The unequal distribution of power across this coalition in American society– wherein, for example, cis gay men and cis lesbian women are welcome to significantly more social acceptance than trans men and women– raises significant questions regarding the LGBTQ cultural sphere and the messages communicated in and of it. How do the mediated messages of LGBTQ life prioritize the concerns of whiteness, cis masculinity, and wealth over the lives of queer people of color, trans people, and the economically disadvantaged? What are the impacts of this uneven social process? Which attachment-archives and histories are LGBTQ people oriented to feel nostalgic about, and which are they not? These questions dominate the second half of this dissertation, questioning the erasure of trans people in gay nostalgias for the 1970s, and the difficulty of film festival spaces to cater to the full diversity of LGBTQ communities in their nostalgic dreaming.

Attending to the *public* nature of mediated nostalgia is also, unavoidably, reckoning with its nature as a commodity within media economies, an emotional state to be bought and sold. Gary Cross writes in *Consumed Nostalgia: Memory in the Age of Fast Capitalism* (2015)*:*

> Nostalgia for the sounds, sights, and objects of the past has created a whole range of longings. And these have been excited and extended by all kinds of consumer industries–magazines, movies, comic-book stores…The magic of consumer satisfaction makes nostalgia a major business. And like all entrepreneurial efforts to meet a demand, these impresarios of memory also create and channel that need, pricking the bud of desire, giving vent to its extravagant blooming, and shaping it in ways that increase sales (6).

In this passage, Cross is describing the transformation of an affective desire into legibility via the marketplace, and the coincident manipulation of that affect for financial gain. Cross outlines four brands of nostalgia: 1) a commitment to official commemoration of group identity in museums and monuments, 2) a more familial honoring of ancestral documents and heirlooms, 3) identification with the aesthetics of the past in fashion and art, and 4) his concept of "consumed nostalgia," a particular fixation on the commodities of the past rooting "from a *personal* experience of *growing up* in the stressful world of *fast capitalism,*" responding to the quickening pace of the twentieth century's cycles of production and obsolescence with a desired personal return via the commodity (10). LGBTQ nostalgia media appears to capitalize on multiple variations from Cross' list: though rarely resulting in official memorialization, it bares the distinct sub-cultural specificity of the first brand; it's an aesthetic preoccupation frequently taking the form of the third; and it results in the market structure of the fourth. Yet in resonating across multiple categories it points out shortcomings in all of them to see the full picture of the nostalgia commodity. Cross' text, similar to Padva's framing of nostalgia as personal recollection, is limited by the insistence on the personal as a gateway to nostalgic relating's significance in the marketplace. A self-admitted baby boomer, Cross' selection of objects mostly relates to the nostalgias of people of his own generation, despite his staunch personal avoidance

of the stain of nostalgia when he admits he "collects nothing" (21). While Cross does gesture to the replication of twentieth century cycles of commodity love for future consumers, his simultaneous insistence on a specifically bounded time-period, in line with the purchaser's own childhood and adolescence, limits our understanding of past-seeking as an affective calling, one that works indiscriminately in and around youth, queering traditional timelines of aging, development, and cultural fixation. Queering this chronology of the commodity attends to the sprawling work of attachment-archives in LGBTQ media publics. *Carol,* for example, speaking to queer audiences in 2015, is attracting viewers who in many cases were not even alive in the 1950s. Yet the film's affects remain nostalgic, even without a mapping onto directly relatable experience.

The history of LGBTQ cinematic art is a testament to mediated nostalgia as a notably *commercial* calling card and desire for LGBTQ audiences. Nostalgia is visible as a principal language of media storytelling in LGBTQ media history. Greco-Roman antiquity, long before its ambient presence in *Call Me by Your Name,* was the attachment-archive powering much of early gay pornography via the male body building physique culture so lavishly preserved by the Bob Mizer Foundation. David K. Johnson describes this appeal to classicism "as a way for gay men to create a folklore of a collective past and a way to legitimize and naturalize admiration for the male body," a dynamic known as "the classical alibi" (873). The cinematic adaptation of Richard Armory's homoerotic historical novel *Song of the Loon* (dir. Andrew Herbert, 1970) was part of a small but critical roster of early to mid-1970s films that bridged a gap between experimental queer cinema and something resembling a more mainstream cinematic economy for queer subject matter, and it did so stressing a nostalgic fantasy of Western cowboy aesthetics.[8] The

[8] This is discussed at length by Ryan Powell in the book *Coming Together: The Cinematic Elaboration of Gay Male Life, 1945–1979* (2019).

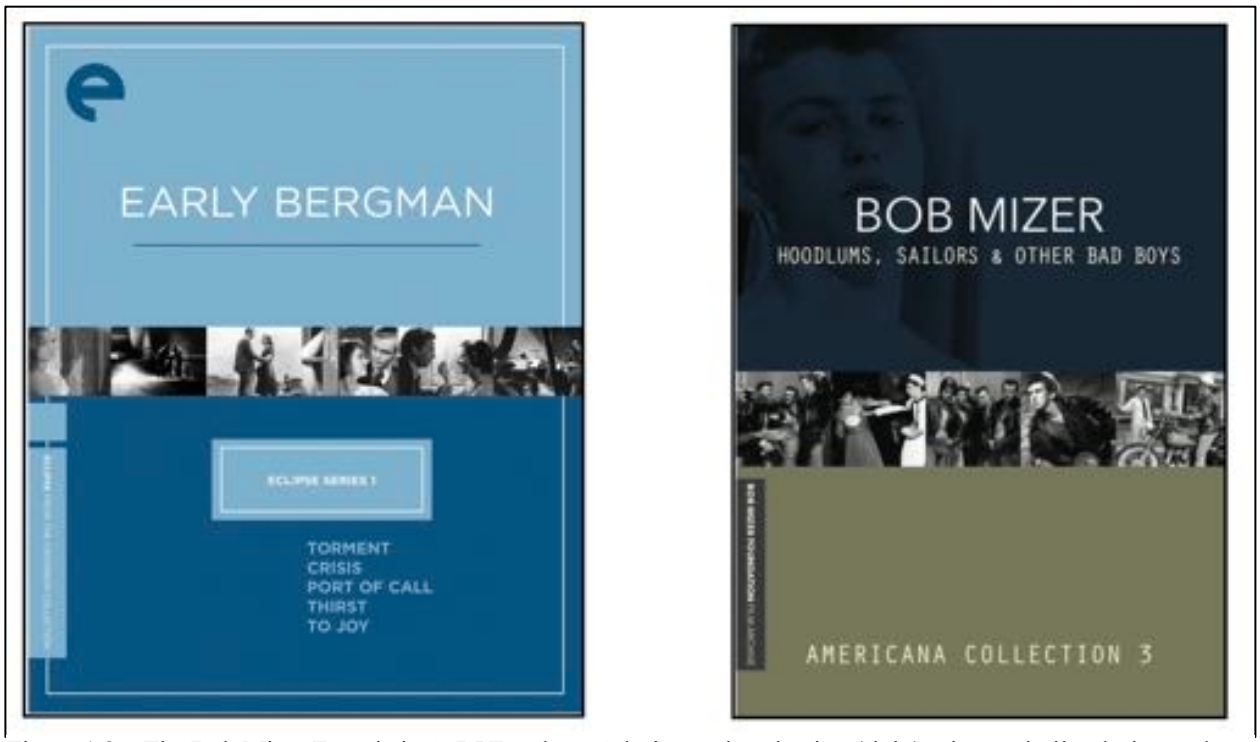

Figure 1.2 – The Bob Mizer Foundation's DVD releases' design and packaging (right) mirrors similar design and packaging from the Criterion Collection's boutique arthouse cinema releases (left, https://www.criterion.com/boxsets/232-eclipse-series-1-early-bergman).

New Queer Cinema movement of the early 1990s that became a boutique brand for urbane audiences frequently depended on nostalgic attachment-archives of the past, as filmmakers like the aforementioned Haynes, Derek Jarman, Isaac Julien, Tom Kalin, Sally Potter, and Hilary Brougher pitched contemporary queer life through the lens of postmodern historical revisionism. These films, far from being just artistic endeavors ruminating on the queer past, premised their success on the public appeal of the queer past at the specialty box office.

LGBTQ nostalgia is clearly capable of being translated into the languages of advertising and media economies, past pleasure-seeking thus becoming sellable as a commodity. To return to the Bob Mizer Foundation example that began this introduction, their strategies of distributing antique pornography display the coordination of nostalgic emotion into LGBTQ media economies. As part of the relaunch, for a time Bob Mizer's films were available on DVD, in handsome box sets with titles like *Bob Mizer: Films of Mythos 1955–1971*, *Bob Mizer:*

Hoodlums, Sailor & Other Bad Boys, and *Bob Mizer: Military Films, 1958–1971*. The collections bear a striking resemblance to the lux physical media releases of the Criterion Collection, an American distribution company that caters to cinephiles and erects a standard of global arthouse cinema with a material effect on which films are validated within those parameters (Figure 1.2).[9] The DVD collections showcase a merging of taste paradigms, the obscene and once illegal early gay pornography redressed as high-culture commodities for sophisticated consumers. With this transformation follows a revision of the public being courted by this sector of media industry; a gentrification of a once-underground art form. One collection, *Bob Mizer: Latinos, 1972–1979*, invites the tense question mark of racial and ethnic difference within this particular gay nostalgic imaginary. Racial and cultural fetishism, reducing identities to costumes and bearing suspect motivation in a genre of historical photography often tied to white supremacist aesthetics, illuminates another area wherein the public being hailed by a nostalgic imaginary is contentious and problematic.[10]

Experiencing these DVD collections one feels the collision of compressed historical time. Opening the *Bob Mizer: Hoodlums, Sailor, & Other Bad Boys* DVD, I'm immediately surprised to notice that the disc itself holds a different name than its outer case, suddenly re-labeled as *Story Film Classics: The Wild Ones*. In addition to the different name, the disc prominently sports the logo of the Athletic Model Guild, Mizer's original company, and is lacking the branding of the later Bob Mizer Foundation that decorates the elegant outer case and produced

[9] In the book *Disposable Passions: Vintage Pornography and the Material Legacies of Adult Cinema* (2016), author David Church analyzes a series of fan-made images of hypothetical Criterion Collection covers for 1960s cult (heterosexual) pornography (8). The simultaneous use of the Criterion Collection as an aesthetic signifier across straight and queer cinephilias indicates its substantial cultural relevance.

[10] A shaky, discomforted defense of the questionable racial politics of Bob Mizer's photography defines part of the Bob Mizer Foundation's nostalgic imaginary. In *Physique Pictorial*'s fifty-ninth issue (2021), Dian Hanson emphasizes a kink-positive reading of racial fetishism that valorizes the stereotypical costuming of non-white models as radical in their editorial "Ain't Nobody's Business But Your Own."

considerable distance between past and present media companies. Once playing, the DVD menu bears the same name as the disc, with black-and-white images of men in wrestling poses. This disjunction exposes different moments of attempted production and distribution: the case a shiny new coat of paint on a previously-made DVD, re-branded to fit a new vision, and with it, a new target audience.

The new title emphasizing *bad* holds a touch of the erotic and beguiling, summoning a curiosity for the iconography of delinquents of the past, holding the viewer in a shared attachment-archive of *bad* antique masculinities. The DVD holds a wealth of films as well as historical information, including a roster of individual model biographies, ready to aid the viewer in resurrecting their favorite forgotten beefcake idol. The packaging of Mizer films hails a public found in-between the various contaminations of time, industrial development, and capital. We see the layers of historical time, a nostalgia broadly construed by the product itself but also multiplied by the awareness of all the different historical times compressed into one commodity: the initial filming on actual film stock as illicit obscenity, its careful circulation, and its re-emergence as a digital files copied onto multiple DVD lines, with the BMF finesse an exterior paint only, reflecting the most recent trends of high-culture home media product. Yet another technological remediation is now found on the BMF's website, with the recent launch of their streaming network, PosingStrap.TV. For $12.99 a month, the ephemeral allure of mid-twentieth century homoeroticism can leave materiality altogether, as a transmission of data in the streaming era.

For this particular line of gay nostalgia media commodities, the beefcake body is used as an icon through which to direct affective desire for the queer past. A desirous binding, activated by properties of feeling and sensation, reaches out to the past through an articulation of sub-

cultural memory, a shared public history. From a fragmentary history, torn between essentialist and social constructionist models, LGBTQ media worlds shape a shared past through nostalgic emotion as an organizing device, cataloging history as an archive of attachments. The larger ethical philosophies powering different strains of LGBTQ nostalgia are solidified as media networks and circulation, as experiences for spectators and users, staging crises and compromise, and the mediation of feelings regarding LGBTQ historicity and time.

1.5 Chapter Outline

Queer Analog Pleasure and Digital Ambivalence: LGBTQ Media Worlds in Nostalgic Times uses a methodology of theoretically-informed close reading of media textualities to illuminate the broader affective formation of LGBTQ nostalgia. Following work by Eugenie Brinkema (2014) and Aubrey Anable (2018), I aim to bring back a sense of the importance of form to studies of affect in media. Brinkema advocates "treating affects as structures that work through formal means" such as "montage, camera movement, mise-en-scene, color, sound" but also "more ephemeral problematics such as duration, rhythm, absences, elisions, ruptures, gaps, and points of contradiction (ideological, aesthetic, structural, and formal)" (37). Articulating a strategy of "radical formalism," Brinkema studies a theoretical form of affect that "has fully shed the subject" and its coincident reliance on embodiment and sensation, existing instead purely as textual form (24). Anable shares Brinkema's emphasis on "reading for affect," suggesting that attending to form "is the only method we have for apprehending something so fugitive" (7). But Anable also mercifully brings this approach down to earth a few rungs by affirming the interconnectedness between embodiment, sensation, and representation. She writes, "The sensing body and the discursive body cannot be separated if one still cares about what it feels like to be

made a legible subject through forms of representation" (8). Anable concludes "We can analyze form, read for affect, and hold on to the body at the same time" (9). I aim to apply this trifold integration of reading practices to attend to the complicated work of affect in mediating LGBTQ cultural expression.

A study of texts and the larger media publics surrounding them, I utilize a close reading practice that crosses categories of media to study the shared imagination and discursive formatting of nostalgia as an affective formation. The second and fourth chapters are rooted in discussions of traditional cinematic textuality, while the third chapter turns toward the interface of online media and app technologies. The fifth chapter merges both varieties, and stretches to incorporate participant observation methods utilized to attend to the multi-dimensional textuality of a film festival environment. The preceding literature sections of this introduction emphasize the theoretical backbone of my reading strategies.

This dissertation is structured in two halves. The first is titled "LGBTQ Nostalgia and Media's Embodied Pleasures" and the second "LGBTQ Nostalgia Media Publics and Queer Community." Providing a basis of analysis for nostalgic attachments themselves, the first half examines the affective binding of media watchers and users to a nostalgic imaginary of queer emotion. I explore this through two chapters that employ a transmedial variety of objects to understand the pull of the past on contemporary LGBTQ people.

Chapter two analyzes the aesthetics of LGBTQ nostalgia media through a framework of human sensation, with visuals that often teasingly problematize touching and the fulfillment of desire. I analyze the historical dramas of U.S. LGBTQ prestige cinema, tying their emergence as a niche sub-genre to the boom in queer temporality criticism happening in the mid-2000s. Focusing on lush literary adaptations *Carol* (dir. Todd Haynes, 2015) and *Call Me by Your Name*

(dir. Luca Guadagnino, 2017), I consider how the tropes of touch and tactility communicate a sensuousness themed around expired time and historical feeling. Following the metaphor "touching the past"– a semantic construction frequently utilized in queer studies literature around temporality and nostalgia– I compare the fantasies of amplified queer sensation in both the theoretical canon and cinematic aesthetics to consider their shared construction of a socio-cultural desire. Both glossy arthouse films wrapped up in industrial discourses of "awards bait," *Carol* and *Call Me by Your Name* depict the management of LGBTQ nostalgic fantasy within the demands of the contemporary media economy. In the process, the two offer alternate strategies of remembering– a cinematic explication of Svetlana Boym's aforementioned reflective and restorative nostalgias– that are intimately wed to the affective politics and poetics of sensation.

Chapter three builds on the discussion of embodiment in mediated nostalgic desire by turning to public sexual cultures online and the increasingly obsolescent nature of traditional queer cruising in the age of hookup apps. Focusing on Squirt, a website dedicated to maintaining traditions of queer male cruising for sex in off-line semi-public spaces, I analyze the adaptation and compromise of queer ritual to new technological standards. This revival of traditional cruising, expressly pitched as an alternative to locative app-based cruising, I term "analog cruising." This chapter emphasizes how "retro" emerges as a powerful consumer strategy born out of queer ambivalence. Extending and transforming the first chapter's focus on aesthetics, chapter two moves to consider the fantasies of LGBTQ nostalgia media as embodied practices and rituals in the real world, as the users of Squirt, I argue, re-enact a form of sexuality whose eroticism depends on its partial extinction. Following a history of gay public sex cultures and the important scholarly literature regarding them, I analyze Squirt's layout, aesthetics, and functionality in its promotion of antique sexual practice. Crucial to this analysis is the opacity

and more diffuse forms of identification and visibility implicit in the romance of LGBTQ nostalgia. The values and affects ornamenting queer opacity power the most direct clash between Squirt and prominent gay hookup apps.

Tying these two chapters together is a shared focus on pleasure facilitated by media. Both LGBTQ prestige historical drama and analog cruising depend upon an erotic hinge– tactility, and its absence in the former, and clarity and its absence in the latter. A playful system of alternation, the texts find pleasure in the contrast and provocation of desires realized and thwarted. This kind of shifting focus is a critical mechanism for both media textualities in terms of stimulating pleasure for the viewers/users. The broader nostalgic affectivity of both texts is routed through this textual operation of presence and absence.

The second half of the dissertation complicates the studies of LGBTQ nostalgia media's affectivity and user/viewer relations by expanding to the larger coordination of diverse media publics. Titled "LGBTQ Nostalgia Media Publics and Queer Community," I compare the senses of history and community emergent from LGBTQ documentary texts and film festival spaces for a broader sense of affective negotiation in LGBTQ media worlds.

The fourth chapter switches gears from contemporary recreations of historical time periods to documentary cinema attempting to make textual sense of the bare materials of LGBTQ history itself. Focusing on a cluster of documentaries waxing nostalgic for the queer 1970s, I consider the effects of intra-group LGBTQ divisions on the affective transmission of nostalgia. Can a nostalgic imaginary be coalitional, and how does LGBTQ media, often bound up in the pretense of queer coalition, negotiate those challenges? I analyze *The Dog,* a historical documentary on a 1972 NYC bank robbery, later adapted into the New Hollywood film *Dog Day Afternoon,* whose real-life events pick at notable tensions and historic pains in the divisions

between cis gay men and trans women. The film presents a nostalgic vision of the gay 1970s, but struggles in its attempts to suture it to a larger political vision of queer and trans inclusion. Looking for a reparative reading, I attend to the moments of the documentary that seem to gesture towards a more challenging read of gay history against its own dominant narration, localized particularly in the limited archival footage of trans woman Elizabeth Eden speaking to the press. I close the chapter with a reading of the experimental film art of trans filmmaker Malic Amalya, who attempts to hone a cinematic aesthetic of joint queer and trans nostalgia for the 1970s through careful re-contextualization of homoerotic fiction from just after its time period.

The fifth chapter leaves the space of strict individual textuality to look at a complicated and networked media public, the LGBTQ film festival. Contemporary LGBTQ film festivals are often held to standards of nostalgic radicalism based on U.S. independent film cultures of the early 1990s, and found diluted and assimilationist as a result. In an effort to track the complex circulation of affects, nostalgic and not, still present within LGBTQ film festivals, this chapter troubles the critique of commodification and investigates the networking of LGBTQ film festival affect amongst contexts of significant socio-historical importance like group belonging, pride, and activism. I offer the concept *affective media network* to consider the organization of public feeling emergent from the negotiated emotional orientation attendees experience through films, corporate installations, and various festival events, each with differing relationships to LGBTQ history. Reading festivals as affective media networks allows us to see them as the unique public spheres they are– mediated spaces of community, ritual, and history that reflect the desires of a specific place and time. Using participant observation methodologies, I focus on Outfest, the premiere LGBTQ film festival in Los Angeles. Paying particular attention to the aggregate of

Outfest's rainbow iconography, and its curation of programmed space, I frame the LGBTQ film festival as an ambivalent space mediating nostalgia for the past against the hope of the future.

In a brief conclusion, I turn to television, the major media platform missing from the remainder of the dissertation. Focusing on Ryan Murphy, the prominent television showrunner perhaps best known for *Glee,* I consider his television shows preeminent sites of the codification of LGBTQ nostalgia as a mainstream media aesthetic, with their accompanying deidealized spots of ambivalence and discomfort. Analyzing an episode of *American Horror Story: Freak Show,* I consider the warring instincts compelling LGBTQ nostalgia media in the contemporary moment, and the lingering influence of nostalgic attachment-archives on the queer cultural imagination writ large.

As a queer nostalgist myself, prone to the sentimental sweep of affective historical binding I have attempted to decodify here, I have wondered when passion was in danger of taking over, and limiting the critical work of serious academic inquiry. I have found this same insecurity felt in many of the writers undertaking similar projects. I ultimately decided that rather than "fighting" the work of emotional undercurrents in these media relationships, it became an important imperative of the research to stay with *feeling* in order to better understand its properties and effects. In tracing the stakes of imagined pasts for LGBTQ audiences, and the work of nostalgic affect in staging grounds for remembering, pleasuring, and mediating, I found a unique window into media's utility as a tool of queer world-making. Overall, this dissertation considers the notable work of analog pleasures in queer world-building, calculated and mediated against structures of digital ambivalence.

Chapter 2 A Compromising Touch: Formulating Nostalgic Pleasure through Queer Haptic Visuality in *Carol* and *Call Me by Your Name*

2.1 Introduction: No Glove, No Love

Figure 2.1 – Carol's hand lingers on the leather gloves in *Carol*.

Carol, the 2015 historical romantic drama based on Patricia Highsmith's 1952 novel *The Prince of Salt,* is about, among other things, a pair of leather gloves. Made of a dashing brown leather and worn by Cate Blanchett as part of her costuming for wealthy housewife and discreet lesbian Carol Aird, the handsome gloves are part of the spectacles of style that dominate the film, rooted in fine costuming, lavish interiors of upper-class homes, and a twinkly, chilly 1950s New York City cast in antique rose-colored light. Carol and her love interest, naïve shopgirl Therese (Rooney Mara), first meet with an auditory smack of the gloves on a department store counter, as Carol idles shopping for Christmas gifts, baring her immaculately painted nails to settle into a

flirtatious meet-cute with Therese (Figure 2.1). These gloves will be "forgotten" by Carol at Therese's desk, necessitating the younger woman to mail them to her with the rest of her purchases, in turn causing a grateful Carol to invite her to lunch in a restaurant of hard wood and deep leather.

Figure 2.2 – Therese answers the telephone in her lonely building.

Shot on Super16mm Academy Award-nominated cinematography by Edward Lachman, critic Peter Howell describes the "era-specific muted colours and softer textures" as evoking the feeling of "stepping inside an Edward Hopper painting." *Carol* is a fascinating film that is simultaneously visually demonstrative and profoundly concerned with the shielded and opaque queer taxonomies of *what cannot be said.* After a date night between Carol and Therese is interrupted by the arrival of Carol's husband Harge (Kyle Chandler), Carol follows up with an apologetic phone-call to Therese's apartment in a shared boarding house with one phone line (Figure 2.2). Therese fearfully whispers "I want…to know…I think…I mean I want to ask you things, but I'm not sure you want that…" Hunched over the phone, Carol responds ardently "Ask me things, please." Disturbed by rowdy young men making noise nearby the phone, Therese

stalls in the moment of tension, hesitant at the threshold of making invisible queer worlds visible. Her moment of reluctance severs the vulnerable connection, as Carol quickly hangs up herself.

With clearer semiotic channels muddied, a kind of transference happens, as objects become endowed with meanings beyond the span of what's possible. The gloves especially carry the weight, as a connecting device for rare and covert queer romantic connection in a hostile time period.[11] Carol's gloves were a creation for the film, freshly manufactured for a 2014 production that did its best to evoke 1952. Although the costumes of *Carol* were largely sourced from rental houses and vintage stores, the clothes for the eponymous glamorous lesbian were largely built from scratch, tailored to the respective visions of director Todd Haynes and his long-time collaborator costume designer Sandy Powell. Accessories as potentially extraneous as a pair of gloves were cause for granular, meticulous effort by *Carol*'s design team. Powell relayed in an interview with *The Los Angeles Times* the importance of these gloves for Therese's enchantment with her older lover, commenting "You see Therese touching the texture of her gloves, and the fineness of her stockings, and then looking inside the contents of her [Carol's] purse and being entranced by what's in it" (Herman). Just as props take on immense significance within the web of *Carol*'s meaning-making, so do entire characters: Carol's spectacular nature is for Therese a portal to a glamorous vision of underground queer 1950s Americana. Cate Blanchett as Carol in *Carol* is as much of a covetable commodity as the gloves, the actress' star power a circulation of glamour as currency, with desire configurable through the structures of the marketplace.

The gloves are a new creation, but intriguingly, they are also based on reality. Highsmith's notorious, fascinating life as a lesbian in mid-century America largely inspired *The*

[11] For more on objects becoming endowed with meaning as a generic gesture in melodrama specifically see Agustín Zarzosa's *Refiguring Melodrama in Film and Television: Captive Affects, Elastic Sufferings, Vicarious Objects* (Lexington Books, 2012).

Price of Salt, where the author imagined Therese as a version of herself.[12] In a re-printed 1990 edition of the novel– one bearing the author's real name, and not the pseudonym "Claire Morgan" she had initially adopted to avoid the stain of an openly queer novel on her successful literary career– Highsmith recalled a memory from her own time working, like Therese, as a department store clerk:

> Into this chaos of noise and commerce, there walked a blondish woman in a fur coat. She drifted towards the doll counter with a look of uncertainty– should she buy a doll or something else?– and I think she was slapping a pair of gloves absently into one hand (quoted in White, "Sketchy Lesbians," 13).

The passage reflects a transient moment of queer curiosity rather than a full-fledge affair. Carol Aird has been said to be based upon Virginia Catherwood, a Philadelphia socialite and lover of Highsmith's, and not the woman gracing the department store that day (White "Sketchy Lesbians" 14). But as a stray detail of some reality, with a quiver of archaeological jouissance, a pair of *Carol* gloves can be said to exist somewhere out in the world, thoroughly aged, as whatever thoroughly transformed material they've become by now, alongside their new duplicated fantasy creation. The new gloves, made of leather and stitching in tribute to the first partially-remembered referent, perform the same cultural work of the film as a whole: opening through artifice an emotional channel of sentimentality, regret, pleasure, and passion that cumulatively constitute the affective grounds of nostalgia.

This chapter investigates the socio-cultural stakes of cinematic pleasure within a sector of LGBTQ nostalgia media that is one of the most prominent and visible sites of cinema's engagement with queer pasts writ large– the LGBTQ prestige historical drama. Like the

[12] *Carol* has some claim to close familiarity with Highsmith and her specific desires as the film's screenwriter, Phyllis Nagy, was a personal friend of Highsmith's towards the end of her life.

manufacturing and selling of fine leather gloves, this chapter follows media commodities made to stimulate pleasure, and oriented towards touching the world around us. Analyzing two glossy literary adaptations designed as "awards bait" for a filmic economy of prestige– *Carol* (2015) directed by Todd Haynes and *Call Me by Your Name* (2017) directed by Luca Guadagnino– I examine how LGBTQ nostalgic pleasure is parceled out to viewers aesthetically, focusing on the films' shared preoccupation with the erotics of tactility.[13] I understand the focus on touch as a trope with radical origins, one emerging from the literary archive of queer theoretical writing on time and history, roughly simultaneous with the trajectory of Haynes' own career. Following touch as a spectacular motif in these films leads us to the compromises inherent in making queer historical drama industrially tangible, concerned with the marketability and respectability of queerness under mainstream American terms. In this way, as with my other case studies, LGBTQ prestige historical dramas become vehicles staging melancholy emotional exchanges over what consolidating media representation and power has brought. The inherent hybridity of the films– as adaptations of older texts, containing aspects of older queer cultures remediated for the standards of socially progressive 2010s– reflects the central ambivalence with which these nostalgias are wrought. Using the variety of nostalgias previously outlined by Svetlana Boym and described in my introduction– reflective vs restorative nostalgias– I unpack the extent to which the films offer divergent philosophies of queer remembering expressed via affective binding and aesthetic pleasure.

The gloves' totemic significance aside, their more basic use is illustrative of *Carol*'s textual priorities: these gloves are used to touch. Lining her hands, Carol's glove provide a

[13] I selected *Carol* and *Call Me by Your Name* from the catalog of LGBTQ prestige historical dramas for their success both with queer audiences and beyond, their role as the creations of two gay-identifying auteurs, and the notable mainstream industrial support afforded to both that goes beyond smaller, more independent LGBTQ historical dramas.

layer– one made of animal hide and the modes of a production of a historically specific time and place– that separate her vulnerable skin from direct contact with other surfaces. They modify her powers of sensation, lending them an extra layer of comfort. Similarly distorting to our sensory properties is cinema– amplifying thermal intensities and the specificity of textures, through a suturing apparatus of desire, even inviting painful sensations and feelings that cause the viewer to wince.

Vivian Sobchack writes of "cinema's sensual address" as a foundational part of its overall socio-aesthetic function and influence in society (55). Scholars like Laura U. Marks have further traced out this essential mechanic into a concept called haptic visuality, a mode of spectatorship wherein "the eyes themselves function like organs of touch," encouraging a relationship between the viewer and the image that goes beyond the purely optical (*Touch* 2). Marks looks at the tactile as a kind of seduction, an erotics of viewing that is transformative. She writes:

> In a haptic relationship our self rushes up to the surface to interact with another surface. When this happens there is a concomitant loss of depth– we become amoebalike, lacking a center, changing as the surface to which we cling changes. We cannot help but be changed in the process of interacting…What is erotic is being able to become an object with and for the world; to be able to trust someone or something to take you through this process; and to be trusted to do the same for others (*Touch* xvi).

The profound power attributed to these "surfaces"– which we can here identify as images of texture and beguiling sensation, amplified by sound, editing, and other cinematic properties– is framed as shattering the very grounds of identity itself, opening to an "amoebalike" mélange of

pleasure receptors in place of a thoroughly indisputable "I."[14] *Queer,* as a noun and a verb, is said to perform much of the same identity work. But as an exchange of control– the "becoming-object" Marks describes– the work of texture and touching is foregrounded as a uniquely powerful and pleasurable constructor/destructor of the self. Cinema is akin to slipping on a glove that suddenly amplifies touch to these extremes, as a super-sensory technology. Fantasies of these desirable aspects of touch, a cultural aggregate cinema undoubtedly participates in, show up notably in queer theoretical writing.

2.2 The Touch Across Time's Radical Promise in Queer Theory

From the 2000s to the early 2010s, the diffuse academic and activist institution known as queer theory was rocked by a boom of interest in the intersections between LGBTQ identity and time. Described by Elizabeth Freeman as "the turn toward time" in a 2007 roundtable discussion for *GLQ,* this critical moment capaciously included multiple strands of thought ranging from revisionary queer historicism to the critique of heteronormative politics of futurity to critical tributes evidencing the temporal position of queer people as its own mode of estrangement from a chrono-normative order of life (Dinshaw et. al.). While Carol Aird describes the wayward peculiarity of Therese Belivet in *Carol* as "flung out of space," here critics emphasized that an important complement in queer life was feeling *flung out of time.* What united these projects, historical and not, was a belief in temporality as richly endowed with cultural meaning and significance, wading in and out of gender and sexuality discourses in powerful ways, with the

[14] Marks' sense of the haptic's power to destabilize the very rigidity of identity puts her in line with Leo Bersani's classic work on gay male sexuality in "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (1988), where he describes a kind of "self-shattering" of the traditional male ego achievable through anal sex wherein "the self is exuberantly discarded" (217-218). This is one of the many cross-overs between Marks' theories of haptic visuals' desire and sexuality and queer theory's writing on media and beyond.

desire to render such an abstract entity as time more tangible through humanities-based scholarship.

Carolyn Dinshaw, whose 1999 book *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* is one of the earlier works of this informal canon, makes the specific link between this investigative focus on time, which she dubs the "queer historical impulse," and the properties of sensation, a connection that proved generative for future writers and this project (1). In an introduction titled "Touching on the Past," Dinshaw introduces touch as a metaphor for queer scholarship about the past, a "touch across time" locatable in the work of queer scholars writing about gender and sexuality in both near and distant pasts. Describing this queer touching, Dinshaw writes "That textual intimacy, that touching…can be an act of community, as it is an act 'between us'…This act is queerly historical because it creates a relation across time that has an affective or an erotic component" (50). Dinshaw invests the act of queer backwards-looking with a great deal of sentimentality, and even eroticism. She outlines listening for the echoes from the past, and diving into the archives of queer lives past, as a sacred act of community affirmation and connection. Her language of "touching" locates this queer historical impulse within the human body and sensation, grounding the fantasy encounter of past and present as a sensory collision verbalized through flesh, as opposed to the myriad of other metaphors Dinshaw could have used about acquiring knowledge.

Elizabeth Freeman further develops the fleshy quality of queer temporal imagination in her book *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010). Freeman suggests a term, "erotohistoriography," to describe queer temporal desire:

> [erotohistoriography] does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it already in the present, by treating the present itself as hybrid…it uses the body as a tool

to effect, figure, or perform that encounter…It sees the body as method, and historical consciousness as something intimately involved with corporeal sensations (95-96).

Elsewhere described as a "fantasy of rubbing up against the past" (xii), the concept of erotohistoriography utilizes Dinshaw's metaphor of "touching" and elaborates it as a queer praxis of historical knowledge-seeking that prioritizes the sensory above more mainstream epistemologies. Sensation is prized as a gateway to a sense of continuity across time; the past as never truly past. Freeman frames erotohistoriography as the undercurrent to a power structure that declares "history should be understood rather than felt" (95), feelings and sensation thus part of a reservoir of the oppressed, underneath a normative patriarchal rendering of history that overvalues allegedly neutral disembodied "understanding."

Read together, the works of this specific moment of queer temporality criticism speak of the immense power of the sensory within which to explore our "queer historical impulse." Roughly simultaneous to this literature are the texts mentioned earlier by Sobchack and Marks that call for a re-integration of pleasure and intimate bodily sensation to how spectatorship is theorized, to, in Sobchack's words, "come to grips [more touching!] with the carnal foundations of cinematic intelligibility" (59). This reflects a moment of scholarly interest and passion in sensation and *what it can do*, in media and elsewhere, with the queer critics contextualizing sensation as a forum endowed with radical, even utopian potential, breaking through traditional structures and rules of epistemology to approach something more profoundly transformative.[15] In combining this tradition with the insights of film and media scholars, I am formulating an overall theory of how our queer sensory fantasies are organized in media.

[15] This hyped focus on the powers of touch and tactility relate to the strains of affect theory favored by Gilles Deleuze and Brian Massumi that focus on affect as surpassing the boundaries of the representable.

More than just a scholarly phenomenon, this trend of queer tactility metaphors reveals a resilient and familiar cultural fantasy that follows LGBTQ cultures more broadly, from the halls of academia to popular media. The examples from historical prestige dramas I explore in this chapter depend upon queer touching as an act of cinematic spectacle that illustrate internal and narrative transformations, both for the characters and the viewer. They also situate LGBTQ media in channels of marketability and compromise. In the following section, I will examine how this tradition of idealistic sensory intensity is an increasingly co-opted part of the newly conceived haptic subject in media creation and distribution, and an integral component of media's configuration of nostalgic pleasure overall.

2.3 The Haptic Subject and LGBTQ Prestige Media Economies

Nostalgia has often marked LGBTQ cinematic storytelling, frequently powering visualizations of queer pasts. But beginning roughly in the 1990s, with the increasing popularization of LGBTQ stories for urbane and liberal audiences of many sexual identities, LGBTQ histories became fodder for prestigious motion pictures with arthouse credentials navigating the markets of awards bait. [16] Playing on long-held cultural associations of costume dramas, period pieces, and heritage films with respectable artistry, this late twentieth-century queering of a familiar awards bait category grew out of the experiments with history, identity, and style that were already occurring in independent cinema circles. The New Queer Cinema movement of the early nineties, a tributary of ghosts haunting LGBTQ cinematic culture, frequently fixed its confrontational, unapologetically political gaze on historical subjects. The English director Derek Jarman's work, starting with the homoerotic biblical re-telling *Sebastiane*

[16] The growth of the gay market in the 1990s as part of affiliation with affluent straight consumers has been documented by Ron Becker in *Gay TV and Straight America* (Rutgers University Press, 2006) and Katherine Sender in *Business, Not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market* (Columbia University Press, 2005).

in 1976, and importantly including *Edward II* in 1991, frequently emphasized anachronism and brash sexuality disrupting the respectability typically accorded to British pasts on film. Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* (1989), Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1992), Tom Kalin's *Swoon* (1992), Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), Hilary Brougher's *The Sticky Fingers of Time* (1997) and Haynes' own *Poison* (1991), *Dottie Gets Spanked* (1993), and *Velvet Goldmine* (1998) all use historical iconography as an archive of broad inspiration for queering and radical political experimentation.

The New Queer Cinema movement's ring of cultural cachet and high-profile arthouse press acquired currency within an industrial economy chasing prestige and the glitz and glamour of awards. Bill Condon's *Gods and Monsters* (1998), starring Ian McKellen as gay classic Hollywood director James Whale towards the end of his life in the 1950s, could be viewed as a proof-of-concept for the mainstream respectability of the LGBTQ historical drama as a category of awards film. Though a box office failure, the film carried McKellen to a Best Actor Oscar nomination and Condon to an Oscar win for Best Adapted Screenplay. B. Ruby Rich, the critic who coined the term "New Queer Cinema," included the film in a 2000 article she wrote for *Sight & Sound* titled "Queer and Present Danger." Suggesting the end of NQC, Rich conceded it was more of a "moment than a movement" (22), turning into a brand of LGBTQ-targeting cinema that had "become so successful as to have dispersed itself into any number of elsewheres." *Gods & Monsters* was among a cluster of films that had "both gilded the lily and sounded the death knell of the New Queer Cinema." Describing the film's appeal, Rich indicates a historical milieu that fit comfortably in dominant standards of quality cinema, "set in a particular corner of the modern edition of Brideshead-land, a place in the not-so-distant past where British accents of the proper vintage can be heard and money is still required for entry"

(24). Here Rich anticipates the currency afforded filmic stories about queer life when done in the vernacular of the historical drama, a kind of stabilizing effect of dilution to potentially subversive queer cinema.

Following *Gods and Monsters* in riding the U.S. film awards circuit to notoriety and press attention would be the dramatic period pieces *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (dir. Anthony Minghella, 1999), *Far from Heaven* (another by Haynes, 2002), *The Hours* (dir. Stephen Daldry, 2002), *Brokeback Mountain* (dir. Ang Lee, 2005), *Capote* (dir. Bennett Miller, 2005), and *Milk* (dir. Gus Van Sant, 2008). More recently, alongside *Carol* and *Call Me by Your Name,* the genre has been a stable source of awards attention, with *The Imitation Game* (dir. Morten Tyldum, 2014), *Bohemian Rhapsody* (dir. Bryan Singer, 2018), *The Favourite* (dir. Yorgos Lanthimos, 2018), and *The Power of the Dog* (dir. Jane Campion, 2021) all wringing drama and pathos from the inherent conflict of "being queer in [x homophobic time period]." Often these films are linked to a general perception of the dreariness of contemporary queer cinema, defined by tragedy, gloominess, and pain. But many of these films, though tragedies, do contain moments of immense nostalgic pleasure, romantically depicting the treasure of finding queerness buried in the past.

With this transition of the LGBTQ period piece from fodder for radical cinematic experimentation to a legible niche in highbrow media's market circulation came a different cultural reputation afforded to the cinematic visualizing of queer pasts. *Saturday Night Live* made notice of this specific brand of LGBTQ cinema in the sketch "Lesbian Period Drama," aired in the season 46 episode hosted by actress Carey Mulligan on April 10th 2021. The fictional film in the mock commercial's execution is a beat-for-beat recreation of the low-profile British film *Ammonite* from 2020, which starred straight-identifying actresses Kate Winslet and

Saoirse Ronan. *Ammonite* attempted to ride a similar wave of prestige and awards campaigning as the other films mentioned here, including a high-profile world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival, which many of the aforementioned LGBTQ prestige historical dramas mentioned had played. One, *The Imitation Game,* won the festival's top award. *Ammonite*'s attempts at garnering buzz failed following a lukewarm-to-negative overall critical response, including negative comparisons to the well-received French film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire,* which was similar in plot and setting and released a year earlier. The broad confusion and cratering of the theatrical distribution market during the COVID-19 pandemic further dampened the film's release, easily opening it up to parody.

Figure 2.3 – A parody of haptic intensity in "Lesbian Period Drama."

The trailer introduces two English women in a dour, vaguely nineteenth century environment– "two straight actresses who dared not to wear makeup" as the sardonic voice-over describes them. They meet in a battered-down cottage, finding each other with furtive glances amidst of a sea of the thuddingly normative. The fake film is adorned with laurels from famous

film festivals and stresses the collaboration of award-winning talent. “Lesbian Period Drama” identifies the “bases” of historical lesbian courtship as 1) grazing fingers, 2) washing carrots, and 3) back nudity during a sex scene. The intensity of corporeal touch makes a notable appearance in all three (especially the first two), proving an awareness of LGBTQ historical drama motifs that is perhaps surprising for a mainstream comedy show (Figure 2.3). But it serves to illustrate the widespread circulation of queer historical touching as a recognizable generic gesture, something easily indexed or even apathetically referenced as a cynical convention. Cinematic details of touch and texture here do not shock or transform, but rather, remind the viewer of the cynical capacity of anything to be reduced to a capitalistic strategy of the marketplace. With “Lesbian Period Drama”’s trailer emphasizing festivals and proximity to awards, traditional film industry benchmarks of validation and industrial success, the furtive touch across time becomes a shadow of a shadow– how can love survive? The trailer uses a pull-quote from the fictional *Lesbian Monthly*: “Sure. I mean, I’m gonna see it” (Saturday Night Live*).* Deflated, with a half-hearted shrug. Suggesting the well-trod existence of the predetermined mainstream industrial category that is “LGBTQ historical prestige drama,” much of the ongoing question for critics and audiences is how soulful identification with the shattering power of touch is leveraged against increasingly cynical corporate strategy’s role in the production of queer media. I believe both *Carol* and *Call Me by Your Name* succeed in this goal, in different ways, but not without a demonstration of the imprint of the LGBTQ historical drama’s newfound industrial relevance.

Grappling with historical change is, in the macro, the primary focus of this dissertation. Part of that grappling with change is attending to the aging of things, how affective formations and their symbolic modes of expression in media inevitably go through a process of re-coding as politics, culture, and society change. Queer haptics, touching, and fantasies around tactility are

inevitably re-written as the tactful symbols of rainbow capitalism. Writing about queer studies in this context writ large, Kadji Amin first describes a framework of utopian queerness indebted to "a set of historical emotions generated within U.S. queer culture and politics around the early 1990s," wherein "queer studies…institutionalized" a nostalgia for transgression and radical politics that motivated what objects could even be called sufficiently queer (187).

Amin includes scholarship of the queer "turn toward time" in his analysis. The resulting value judgement thrust upon objects of queer critique– one operating out of critics' own nostalgia– limited a wider cultural reflection on work that failed to fulfill a perfect criteria of queer ethics. Advocating a strategy he terms "deidealization," Amin offers a critical lens that "deexceptionalizes queerness in order to analyze queer possibility as inextricable from relations of power," focused on "living with damage in a damaged world" (10) where "complicity is sometimes necessary for survival" (11). Amin uses deidealization in pursuit of what happens to "queer" as a theoretical designation in light of troubling qualifiers to queer critique, such as the racial fetishism of Jean Genet.

But rather than grapple with the conditions and qualifications of "queer"– a lively area of academic debate outside the parameters of this project– I'm more interested in the inevitable compromise and instability of media, in textuality and consumption, when a vaulted fantasy of "touching the past" must coexist with the power structures that facilitated the encounter. What happens to queer fantasies of touch in light of this conflict? The objects of this study could be described as *deidealized,* viewed in full light of their limitations.

Such a deidealized view seems especially necessary when recent scholarship has illuminated the role of sensation in historical learning outside of any radical political valence. In *Engaging the Past: Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge* (2015), Alison

Landsberg notes the sudden ubiquity of "the experiential mode" of learning history, one that emphasizes feeling and affective communication over "conventional history's privileging of a cold, clinical, detached gaze on the past" (111). She elaborates:

> The omnipresence of this experiential mode bespeaks a widespread popular desire to bring those close and, in this context, to have a personal, felt connection to the past. The experiential mode is tactile and material in the bodily sense. The experiential is first and foremost an affective mode: when engaged this way, one's body is touched, moved, provoked (3).

In language that is reminiscent of earlier writing by Dinshaw and Freeman, Landsberg notes the popularity of these fleshly means of encountering history in a manner that isn't specifically queer or even connected to issues of gender and sexuality. Reading Landsberg, the kind of historical touch laden with queer radical politics in the writing from queer temporality scholars now seems more (perhaps dangerously) universal, and potentially institutional. Attention to tactility becomes not a form of inherently radical praxis at all, but rather a language of historical engagement that can be used for multiple political motivations, such as the production of awards-seeking prestige cinema within the media industries. The key difference in the scholars 'frameworks is Freeman aligns herself with an eroto-historiographic method– for her, after all, in her spin on a familiar Jameson adage, "history is what pleasures"– while Landsberg takes expressed pains to distance herself from a stance on an experiential mode of history (117). She emphasizes, "This book is meant as neither a celebration nor a critique of 'affective historiography, 'but it does insist that the experiential or affective mode, in conjunction with more explicitly cognitive modes, can play

a role in the acquisition of historical knowledge" (10).[17] Landsberg's ideal of sensory historiographic practices that "break the illusion" is similar to how scholars of nostalgia such as Svetlana Boym place an ethical valorization onto *reflective* modes of nostalgia, aware of their own constructed fantasy, over the *restorative* models that find in nostalgia absolute, eternal truths. Reading Landsberg's research, touch as a praxis of historical knowing emerges as a more politically variable practice than the principles of eroto-historiography and the boom of queer temporality criticism would imply.

We might then consider touch, whether literal or haptically visual, as a bodily sense capable of being valued and discursively managed by dominant power structures, much the way acts of looking are frequently theorized as the perpetuation of patriarchal and white supremacist gazes. David Parisi in *Archaeologies of Touch: Interfacing with Haptics from Electricity to Computing* (2018) has mapped out the development of what he describes as the "haptic subject," the constructed consumer of tactile technologies such as touch screens, gaming systems, and smart phones. Parisi writes, describing technological developments throughout the twentieth century:

> a new technological *haptic subject* emerged that served to both mark and steer the drastic changes touch underwent as it became increasingly an 'object-target 'of scientific knowledge, engineering and design practice, bureaucratic management, therapeutic discourses, and commercial investment. This haptic subject embodies the self-conscious efforts scientists, engineers, and marketers made to transform touch, as they sought to give tactility a new utility in a political economy of sensations vital to a society with a

[17] Perhaps owing to a disciplinary divide between English (Freeman) and History (Landsberg), Landsberg is more wary of "losing ourselves in the illusion" (59) of affect and sensory communication, and praises the experiential history sources that seek to break, however briefly, a sense of "over-identification" with the viewer (35). My own writing is prone to flights of sentiment and attempts to balance the two outlooks.

> growing dependence on the efficient circulation of information through sensing bodies (4).

The desire to touch, and the intensity promised out of fleshly interconnection, read through Parisi's research is not just an organic urge but one that has been molded and influenced by commodification. And the contours of its shape have been determined not singularly but by a wealth of collaborating actors from different areas of life, collectively seeking to capture touch as a value that can be operationalized within economic systems. Noting the work of scholars like Jonathan Crary who argue for touch's de-prioritization beneath other realms of sensory knowledge-making in Western culture, Parisi notes that this very cultural myth has made touch a ripe target for nostalgia-laden marketing, where gaming devices such as the Nintendo DS "positioned touch as a neglected and marginalized experiential modality that could be rediscovered through a pleasurable tactile interfacing with computers" (267).[18] If touch can be molded as an embrace of the capitalistic pomp and circumstance of Silicon Valley's innovations in digital media, one wonders what this says for the role of haptic visuality in the more antique mediums of cinema and photography, part of the same "mode of haptic subjectification that would foster a desire in consumers to reconnect with their lost sense of touch" (9). And this very *lostness* dominating the affect of this consumer relationship lends it a nostalgia similar to Dinshaw's original framing of a queer historical touch– absence longing to be reconstructed in the present.

[18] Parisi also wrote, with Mark Paterson and Jason Edward Archer, a call for the emergence of haptic media studies as a sub-field in a 2017 special issue of *New Media & Society.* The authors make it clear that the goals of the field as they envision are "to see how haptic habits have materialized, and how the socio-technical construction of haptic interfacing has emerged through the accretion and patterning of particular practices and protocols" (1518). While they make clear that their focus is not on haptic *visuality,* the kind analyzed by Marks and Sobchack, I aim to integrate a study of haptic visuality with the context and insights brought forth by Parisi et. al.

The cultural desire for touch was articulated in queer artistic and theoretical practice early, both through the work of scholars and filmmakers. If we are in a "haptic age," the various claims of which are explored by Robert Jütte in his cultural history of sensation, these changes are certainly felt in all areas of a media ecosystem, both those sporting a radical trace and not (238). As cinema adapts to the complicating world of media, both artists and industries seize upon "touch" as a crucial site of affective engagement. The intensity of a feeling body, in and of the erotics of the past, is a very *timely* commodity, riding the nexus of these various developments in cinematic aesthetics and media industry strategy to the complicated syntheses they are today.

LGBTQ nostalgia media is a mediating technology, staging crisis and compromise along the fault lines of notable friction points in LGBTQ culture. In *Carol* and *Call Me by Your Name,* historical binding through touch is fully framed and lavished as nostalgic spectacle, with the affective bitterness of nostalgia, its melancholy underside, as a more guarded contemplation of our new haptic subjectivities in media industry marketplaces. The result is a thoroughly *deidealized* nostalgia. *Carol,* which I will turn to more fully next, is an ideal text to explore these tensions, considering that, after all, its centerpiece romance begins in a department store: affective draws parceled out into commodities to be bought and sold, like its melodramatic genre's larger promise of cash for emotional transformation.[19] Equally, the film is the product of both a director with roots in subversive independent filmmaking and an executive producer who looms large as a representation of Hollywood cruelty and the widespread complicity of silence against sexual violence, Harvey Weinstein. However little his impact on the film overall, the

[19] *Carol*'s department store as the birthplace of the film's queer flirtation also rings interesting bells with John D'Emilio's classic insights on the role of capitalism in LGBTQ social formation writ large in his article "Capitalism and Gay Identity" (1983). D'Emilio argues that due to urbanization and capitalism's fostering of complex city social ecosystems, "Capitalism has created the material conditions for homosexual desire to express itself as a central component of some individuals' lives" (474).

insignia of The Weinstein Company remains branded upon the film in its streaming and physical media releases, a reminder of the normalization of open secrets of sexual abuse in Hollywood, and the discomforts of collaboration stomached by even the most idealistic-seeming projects. [20] The anxious co-presence of socio-economic contextualization, with commodities secured at huge compromises of value, and the hopes of transcendent beauty and emotion inflame *Carol.*

2.4 *Carol*: Grazing an Expired Past

The viewer of *Carol* is introduced to the space of Frankenberg's department store, where Carol and Therese first meet, twice. First it is seen through the lens of Therese's own private recollections in the back of a taxicab, where the sounds of urbane traffic trigger a memory association of the (notably quieter) toy train set and idyllic, miniature Christmas village that decorate the department store. The images are incredibly grainy, with the glamorous Carol looming in medium close-up, her image obscured by sparkling lens flares in the foreground of the shot. Across a sound bridge that ties the ambiance of New York City at night to a ringing alarm clock, the film begins its literal chronology with Therese waking up for work. A blanket-clad Therese lights her oven with a match to warm the frigid apartment and brushes her teeth in the kitchen sink, a rare moment of working-class realism in a film besotted by the luxury interiors and outfitting of Carol's world. A stark rejoinder to the cozy, twinkling vibes of the previous montage, an aesthetic muscle of juxtaposition is introduced.

After traveling to work with her boyfriend via a cold bicycle ride, Frankenberg's is introduced again, this time through a less rose-colored filter, as a security guard flatly hands

[20] Weinstein had no creative input on the film and no real involvement in its production besides securing the rights to the film's U.S. distribution in 2013. *Carol*'s producer Elizabeth Karlsen went as far as to suggest through his influence he "stole" a producer credit on the film he did not deserve (Gilchrist). This was part of a wave of figures associated with the film, including Blanchett, expressly distancing themselves from Weinstein in the wake of the 2017-2018 revelations of widespread rape and sexual abuse conducted via his industrial influence.

Therese a Santa hat with a half-hearted "Compliments of the season, from the management." The industrial cafeteria of the department store is even less inviting, with harsh overhead lighting striking a greenish yellow on miserable-looking faces as Therese reads an employee manual asking at the top "Are you Frankenberg material?" The text reads "Each Store Member shall be considered a representative of Frankenberg's and must at all times maintain a clean, hygenic, and moral appearance before our most treasured assets, our customers," the vague "moral" qualifier an early foreshadowing of the "morality clause" that will come to destroy Carol's hopes of maintaining custody of her daughter, her queerness thus revealed as a fireable offense in the occupation of wife and mother. The film cuts to a vertical panning shot of Therese taking inventory of stacked boxes underneath an imposing wall of baby dolls in frilly outfits– Therese is visually matched with baby dolls throughout the film– before cutting to her turning on the miniature train set. In the dark of the store, the quaintly artificial Christmas village sparkles even more tenderly, the train cutting through imitation snow and tiny buildings with faint orange interior glow. Perhaps in a nostalgic fantasy of her own, Therese is then interrupted by the ticking-on of the store's intercom, as the lights flicker on one by one and a larger, more complicated workspace is revealed.

The scaffolded duality of *Carol*'s visualizations of the department store are a hint to the film's focus on the affective properties of memory to create pleasure, for its characters, but more significantly for its audiences. The film unfurls as a queer attachment-archive of mid-century covert lesbian connection. Feeling the coordination of the film's affectivity, aesthetically produced by various cinematic devices, the film invites a double-take of reflective consideration. We are willfully seduced by the properties of pleasurable entanglement. The New York City cold of winter is alternately expressed as dreamy and bitter, with the miniaturized Christmas village

open to a kind of haptic looking Laura U. Marks identifies as *grazing*– a textual key to the operation of pleasure in the film.

Marks' nomenclature around grazing comes out of a specific passage about haptic looking: "Haptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture. It is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze" (*The Skin of the Film,* 162). In her footnotes, Marks attributes the wordplay around gazing/grazing to a conversation she had with Canadian experimental filmmaker Mike Hoolboom, an HIV-positive gay man whose work frequently focuses on issues of memory, death, and time related to AIDS. Hoolboom's work is analyzed by Marks at length in her second volume of haptic visuality criticism following *The Skin of the Film, Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media.* There's something notably queer about attention to haptic visuals and grazing, with Hoolboom's role in the coining of the term a serendipitous connection.

Figure 2.4 – Frankenberg's Christmas Village is a light in a darkened department store.

In an article evocatively titled "On How Queer Cinema Might Feel," Davina Quinlivan specifies Marks' mechanic of grazing for queer cinema as "a kind of looking which yields to a body that cannot be possessed, motivated by a searching gaze which fails to rest on a single entity or body" (69). Therese, a photographer, is certainly the follower of this searching gaze, which we frequently take on ourselves as viewers throughout *Carol.* In Therese's reverie at the Christmas Village, the camera takes on this *grazing* approach, lingering over the artificial textures of a quaint (heteronormative) display, feeling out their differences with what other textures the film displays. Crinkled white cloth imitating snow, the small porcelain rectangles imitating buildings. The dark gray roof of one is lavished with particular attention, the small flecks of glitter faintly visible in the rough horizontal etching. The hard/soft juxtaposition compliments the established cold/warm, the latter summoned again by the glow of the lightbulbs illuminating the small painted buildings. In the dark of the pre-lit store it projects a cozy, inviting embrace, an ephemeral pleasure that, ironically, will be largely unavailable to customers once the store is flooded with light (Figure 2.4). Similar to cinema overall, no actual warmth emanates from this light, for it is just a simulacra of a small heated cottage created visually. No actual touching is enabled by *Carol,* but the visuals work to simulate it *and stimulate* its affects.

The affectivity opened by *Carol*'s formal structures uses juxtaposition and artifice to invite identification on a visceral, sensory level that teases along the borders and boundaries of the pleasurable. The film *grazes* its subjects, teetering at the edges of contact– of things said and unsaid– in a replication of the dynamics of a guarded queer romance. *Carol*'s miniature Christmas Village reads as an almost ironic re-contextualization of mainstream heteronormative models of nostalgia for the 1950s, the decade an enduring and distinctly white fantasy in kitsch marketing frequently rooted in, as Gary Cross describes it, "wholesome, middle-class scenes"

(93) and the hope for "a carefree and happy future" (97). Even if *queer* investments in the 1950s could hardly be described as the same, *Carol*'s play with quaint fifties aesthetics stand as a testament to Alexander Doty's maxim of how "the queer often operates in the nonqueer, as the nonqueer does within the queer" (3). The film's attachment-archive is unapologetically nostalgic, relishing in the beauty to be found in the decor of the past, and even expressing a passion for the very discretion and guarded furtiveness of the 1950s queer underground moment. But these pleasures do not go un-reflected-upon: the 50s material and commodities pose a *literal* environmental threat that dominates a subsequent film by Haynes, just as 1950s anti-gay discrimination and social rigidity has poisonous effects. *Carol* configures what Patricia White describes as "a 'retro' construction from the post-feminist, post-gay present…[that] registers the political gains– and losses– that have interceded" ("Sketchy Lesbians" 11). A vocabulary of sensation becomes the ideal means of expressing this ambivalence. These pleasures of a vulnerable queer underground are ephemeral and fleeting, and all the more delicious because of it, but also potentially misleading in their cinematic construction. The luxurious unreality of the film speaks to the artifice lying at the heart of *Carol*'s simulated pleasures, that nonetheless– in a notable departure for Haynes' career– attempt to live within a more convincing, fully fleshed-out approximation of the queer past via its insistence on haptic visuals.

Todd Haynes has been to the fifties before. With a career largely focused on period pieces of different kinds, the director's auteur brand is thoroughly implicated with explorations of gender and sexuality approximated to specific time periods. Before *Carol,* the queer 1950s has been the subject of three major films by Haynes: *Poison* (1991), *Dottie Gets Spanked* (1993), and *Far from Heaven* (2002). All three are defined by a postmodern style that desire less to depict the actual lives of queer people in the 1950s than to overpower the viewer with calling cards and

references to the pop culture and visual style of the moment, drawing socio-political themes out of the assemblage.[21] Though *Carol*'s visuals prompt considerations of the cultural work of the artificial, they are a mere shadow of the camp drag that defines some of Haynes' other work. In near-Brechtian efforts of careful staging and deliberate artifice, these are much less haptic films than *Carol,* more fixated on broad composition and posturing than extreme-close-ups of texture and sensation. If, as Marks describes, haptic visuality in cinema is often born out of "the desire to squeeze the sense of touch out of an audio-visual medium," expressing impatience with the visual's inherent limitations and the need to feel more and more, a similar insistence defines Haynes' relationship with the queer 1950s, repeatedly summoning its ghosts for encounters of nostalgic pleasure (*Touch* 4). In her work on the fandom of lesbian pulp fiction art, Amy Villarejo discusses the "incessant return to the mid-century" as a lingering fascination in queer art, the aesthetics and historical emotions of repression and ardent desire, 50s clothing and noir colors, a cultural thrall under which Haynes' work could also be categorized (160).

Carol and Therese's first drive to New Jersey is among the most notable sequences in the film for its striking attention to formalist excess. It feels significant that we have already seen Carol in a car once in the film by the time this scene occurs– in one driven by her close friend and ex-lover Abby (Sarah Paulson), who is driving her back to her husband after a lunch-time meeting with Therese. In a comparably mundane sequence, the stiff traffic annoys both Abby and Carol, and Abby even asks with a hint of faux-seductive parody "Do you want to tell me about her [Therese]?," lightly deflating the hyped romance of their previous meeting.

[21] This is especially true of the conceptual and showy styles of *Poison* and *Far from Heaven,* though the mostly-realist *Dottie Gets Spanked* is ornamented in 50s television camp and ultimately devolves into a Freudian dream sequence at its conclusion that recalls Alfred Hitchcock's work with Salvador Dalí in *Spellbound* (1945).

Figure 2.5 – The sequence in Carol's car blurs time and reality in a lavish excess of style.

Carol's lavish design elements ramp up significantly for Carol and Therese's drive to New Jersey, showcasing affective intensity through juxtaposition (Figure 2.5). Time seems to blur as the images acquire a dreamlike hue and dissolve into one another. Mild conversation attempts from Carol are heard, overwhelmed and nearly inaudible under the sentimental non-diegetic score, which begins to intertwine with the diegetic pop music of Carol's car radio. The camera's focus racks in and out over a montage of shots: the view from the car, close-ups of the fashionable bloom of Carol's fur coat, Therese's peacefully delighted face, an extreme-close-up of the few blonde hairs out of order on Carol's immaculately coiffed head. Carol's gloved hands appear on the wheel and controls of the car from time to time, reminding us who is in control– is this a witch casting a seduction spell? At one point a shot of Therese looking out a taxicab window from the narrative endpoint of the story, in effect a flash-forward, is superimposed onto the image.

Figure 2.6 – Glass barriers instill moments of melancholy rumination and haptic identification in *Carol*.

Allain Daigle, in his previous analysis of the film, focuses particularly on this moment as the quick interruption of the future–Therese destabilizing the film's linear plot development and opening up a scrambled queer temporality. But if there's a *textual* logic the film utterly solidifies in this sequence it is one of moving through the world texture-first: the cold wet glass of the car window against the warm fur of Carol's coat. True to a strategy of eroto-historiography, the sequence demonstrates memory, affect, and historicity stored in a textual coordination of sensory capability, rooted in the imagined haptic interface of body and texture. Glass has its own further associations: camera lenses, television screens, a cold barrier that, though it appears transparent, separates us from the reality of what we're seeing (Figure 2.6). Against so many *warm and cozy* haptic invitations, glass is a cold reminder to which the film frequently returns.

The film's thermal alternation in its haptic visual systems reflects the frequent ways in which the 1950s setting of the film highlights the interruptive work of power, casting a negative shadow on the film's romantic pull. Patricia White reads the presence of a lawn jockey statue in

the department store's Christmas village as "as a sign of obdurate racial hierarchies invisible to the film's characters," but importantly not to the audience ("Lesbian Reverie" 40).[22] While White attempts to formulate this as a sign of politically generative intentionality on the film's part, it does not excuse the overall whiteness of the film, and the standards of white beauty personified by Blanchett and Mara that are key to the film's sense of glamour as a financial commodity. More accurately, the attention called to the lawn jockey statue could be described as a regretful admission of the film's circulation in a marketplace molded by white supremacy. This represents an instinct of interruption and puncture to the blooming fantasy of the film that I think is the ideal way to read the film's situated-ness within contexts of capital and commodification; the importantly *deidealized* components of the film's nostalgia, the cold glass against the warm swoon.

Just as the love story is locked in the racialized contexts of its release, class and capitalism equally deidealize the love story at the film's center. Therese is the salesgirl and Carol purchaser; their socio-economic roles become fundamental touchstones for their romantic relating. Power imbalance in general is woven into the erotic relating of Carol and Therese, not just through their older/younger age split and their accorded disparate levels of comfort, but in Carol's role as inductor of Therese into a queer way of being. Carol is queer history writ large for Therese, and thus for the viewer as well, and– recalling the earlier distribution of *Carol*'s costuming work, mostly repurposed period attire for the cast but only new simulacra of 50s glamour for the title character– a precisely configured fantasy. Therese's role as student to Carol's educator demands a vulnerability of her. It's of little wonder then the sensory vocabulary

[22] White less persuasively attempts to consider the presence of a heterosexual black couple at the film's conclusion– non-speaking background characters passing casually through the frame– as a sign of an incoming multi-racial America that "threatens to burst the bubble of the film's historical fantasy" (44). I am more convinced by Danielle Bouchard and Jigna Desai's criticism of *Carol* as a less progressive and less intersectional look at the fifties than Haynes' previous work, with "brief and superficial" (211) appearances of non-white characters that stage "implicitly racialized practices of looking" (206).

of the film stresses being sensitive to the touch, an opening to the world by-sensory-provocation that, in Marks' words, "is erotic…[through] being able to become an object with and for the world; to be able to trust someone or something to take you through this process; and to be trusted to do the same for others (*Touch* xvi)." Patricia White helpfully details the taboo older/younger erotics that permeate Carol and Therese's relationship, noting Therese's styling is similar to Carol's daughter Rindy, with an identical haircut. The kinky suggestion of age-based power roleplay White identifies, without sincere judgement, as "the sleazier side of Highsmith's own sexual compulsion, which…survives in the very structure of the story's seduction fantasy." "The film's well-heeled projection of midcentury sapphism" thus reads as a kind of cover-up to appear appropriate for the film's prestige drama ambitions, smuggling underground grit into a fancy period piece ("Lesbian Reverie" 46).

From the furtive passion of their phone call, described earlier, Therese is shown at a lustful distance away from queer worlds, begging for the acquisition of knowledge by whatever means necessary, knowledge that it seems only Carol can provide. Some days after the aborted phone call, Therese is buying a gift for Carol in a record store– yet another place to buy and sell– where her attention is beguiled by two women standing by the window. One sports a more butch styling, while the other is a sort of mid-century hard femme. The women stare at Therese hungrily. The film's editing keeps our access to their world incredibly limited– one frame of recognition, book-ended by two reaction shots from Therese– but its world-building capacities have an outsized reaction on the film. Another queer world barely *grazed,* pleasurably viewed if just for a moment, through the cruisy affordances of capitalistic consumption.

Figure 2.7 – Carol's bare feet in a picturesque Christmas scene instill a thermal logic to the film's haptic intimacy.

Material things that can be bought and worn are viewed as sites of haptic comfort in *Carol,* but balanced with an eternal awareness of the vulnerability of naked flesh. In the sequence with Carol and Therese at Carol's mansion home, the queered spectacle of Rockwellian 50s Christmas kitsch, fabric and flesh take precedence as the points of sensory audience affiliation. While wrapping presents for her daughter, Carol is shown in bare feet, lounging on the carpet as Therese plays the piano (Figure 2.7). Carol moves over to Therese and places her hands on her shoulders, the moment of physical contact temporarily and cautiously breaking the distance between the two women. Carol's finger grazes Therese's clothed back delicately; Carol is the *toucher,* Therese is the *touched*. The women's moment of intimacy is broken by the sudden sound of the door opening, as Carol's husband Harge returns home from work. In a panic, Carol hurriedly puts her shoes back on her feet before Harge enters the room.

Retroactively, Carol's bare feet– which the film treated casually before Harge's interruption– become a visible representation of queerness, rendered so by Carol's immediate move to conceal them. The presence of her naked feet are suddenly a testament to everything

that makes this not just a get-together between two platonic girlfriends. Equally, in this nostalgic Christmas scene an economy of sensory exchange has just been created: bare feet on the carpet as a rare mark of vulnerable flesh's engagement with material other, a lowering of one's guard as a profoundly erotic transaction. And the return of heteronormative patriarchy's governance renders this brush of sensation as rare and fleeting. In light of this schematic, Therese's back at the piano is defined by a layer of cloth blocking the shocking meeting of flesh on flesh. In this way the material objects, a sign of their circulation in a world of money, status, and class, are both a desirous cover and a kind of traveling necessity to get through a hostile world– an economy of hot and cold thermal tactile provocation.

After *Carol* and the 2017 film *Wonderstruck,* Haynes made *Dark Waters* (2019), a legal thriller about DuPont Chemicals 'poisoning of a West Virginia town with dangerous perfluorooctanoic acid through the production of Teflon. While stylistically very divergent from his other films, *Dark Waters* carried forward an association with 1950s Americana in a unique way. After a career spent using iconography from 1950s suburbia to show its poisonous systems of normative social regulation, emphasizing gender and sexuality, *Dark Waters* zeroes in on the more literally, materially corrosive effects of classic '50s kitchenware, the health of worlds complexly inter-determined between the social and the environmental, at the mercy of capitalistic greed. This suggests an interest in texture and materiality beyond that of the typical queer historio-affective encounter, one also aware of the massive build-up of fabric, plastic, and other commodities from the 1950s and the systems of economic power and inhumanity they represent. *Dark Waters,* in effect, is a proof-of-concept emphasizing texture's imbrication within the literal after-effects of power and control discourses, and the centrality of these ideas to Haynes' body of work. Similar materials mediate and interrupt connections between flesh in

Carol, a layer of historically-specific produced commodity that is identified as both boundary and desired object at once. The specifics of these materials and their beguiling surfaces– Carol's fur coat, the leather gloves, the shoes hiding her bare foot, Therese's clothed back– acknowledge a layer of remove in the film's pursuit of an erotic nostalgia. This outer, touchable layer is as seductive as it is distancing, even dangerous, grounding us in a time period with specific fashion and modes of production that enabled both beauty and pain. Like the film overall, it grazes a profound tenderness, while underlining it with remove, as if afraid to touch too deeply. This remove equally enables reflection and further interrogation of the very attachment-archives driving these nostalgic pleasures.

Carol reflects a brand of LGBTQ prestige historical drama that derives pleasure from the hot-and-cold alternation of nostalgic fantasy with the undercut of reality, deidealized pleasures contextualized in their capitalist compromise. Yet, as Haynes' career-long fascination with the fifties attests, it retains a romantic sway that is a seductive tonic. It is precisely this tension between the swoon and the compromise that formulates the affective formation of nostalgia in LGBTQ media worlds. These alternate levels of meaning and impact open up a polysemic quality to LGBTQ nostalgia media that hosts a fantasy of queer promise while quickly contextualizing it in a purposeful flatness. Laura U. Marks notes that haptic visuality "implies a fundamental mourning of the absent object," obsessing over texture and up-close visions of sensation yet brutally aware "that it cannot know the other" (*The Skin of the Film* 191). I agree with Patricia White's reading of *Carol* that views it as fundamentally in and of the same cinematic goals, as "the formal features of Haynes's film provide entrée for historical as well as erotic fantasy– they bribe the viewer into experiencing a desired vision of the past at the same time as they signal the limits of the fantasy" ("Lesbian Reverie" 40). Yet it remains an important

addition that we understand the centrality of sensation and embodiment to the currents of *Carol*'s pleasure, routing the delivery of nostalgic pleasure in LGBTQ narratives through the tremulous iconography of historical touch.

2.5 *Call Me by Your Name*: Organic Temptations

Unlike *Carol, Call Me by Your Name* (2017, dir. Luca Guadagnino) frames backward-looking nostalgia as part of its own diegetic universe. Though set in a sunny, dreamy vision of the early 1980s, the characters' passions harken back to even more aged terrain, Roman antiquity. Mr. Perlman (Michael Stuhlbarg), the father of the film's lovelorn protagonist Elio (Timothée Chalamet), is a professor of archaeology, who has a hunky graduate student Oliver (Armie Hammer) staying with his family at a luxurious villa in rural Northern Italy. Mr. Perlman's research is shown in the film, most at length when Elio accompanies his father and Oliver to an archaeological site at a shoreline of Lake Garda where a ruin has been found. The first part of the ruin to be located is an arm, complete with an intact five-fingered hand. The men approach it gingerly, Mr. Perlman taking it in his hands as a precious remnant of history. After the rest of the sculpture, a full statue of a naked masculine physique, is found in the water, we are told by Mr. Perlman it is by the 4th century Greek sculptor Praxiteles. At one time the statue was in the possession of the Roman emperor Hadrian, and ultimately it was lost in a nineteenth-century shipwreck. Perlman details over a shot of the surfacing body that during Hadrian's ownership the other matching statues of its set were melted down to be "recast as a particularly voluptuous Venus." As the shot proceeds the statue surfaces to the water level– visually analogous to an earlier moment of Elio watching Oliver in their family's pool– and reveals a full penis and testicles, quietly instituting a commentary of male beauty recycled into the feminine by the march of time, a history of homoeroticism obscured.

Figure 2.8 – Elio and Oliver "shake hands" with a grip on an archaeological relic.

At the shoreline, Oliver inspects the ancient arm as Elio walks up next to him. The two having previously squabbled over pushy attempts from Elio to match-make Oliver with local girl Chiara (Victoire Du Bois), Elio extends a hand in reconciliatory apology, in-line with the angle at which Oliver is holding the relic arm. “Tregua?” Elio asks, the Italian word for “truce.” Oliver laughs and shakes Elio’s hand with the hand of the ancient sculpture (Figure 2.8). The two men stand at either end with a grip on the past, something far more substantial than a graze. *Call Me by Your Name,* released two years after *Carol,* evidences many similar traits of the LGBTQ prestige historical drama, while housing a notable escalation of its cinematic vocabulary of desire. Where *Carol* retreats lustfully, *Call Me by Your Name* attacks, attempting a fuller satisfaction of the haptic pleasures that *Carol* was similarly fixated upon.[23] This attack is still

[23] This attacking vs. retreating distinction feels implicity gendered in the contrasting ways lesbian women and gay men are marketed to as economic subjects. *Call Me by Your Name*’s sensory forthrightness could speak to the open eroticism that defines gay marketing, while *Carol*’s more spectral erotics recall Patricia White’s study of lesbian cinematic representability’s origins in absence in *UnInvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (1999). This is wrapped up in larger discourses of advertising wherein, as Sarah Murray and Megan Sapnar Ankerson write, “lesbians remain largely outside advertising’s measures of knowability” (55).

marked by nostalgia's characteristic melancholy awareness of the transience of all things, and even feels notably censored in several key scenes. But overall, its very fleshly, organic focus on everything touchable, as opposed to *Carol*'s more material, processed sacred items, speaks of a philosophy of nostalgic pleasure less content to reflect, and more aimed to feel again.

Call Me by Your Name, like *Carol,* is a literary adaptation, drawing its inspiration from André Aciman's 2007 novel of the same name. It follows Elio, a 17-year-old, who discovers his own queer sexuality with the arrival of 24-year-old graduate student Oliver into his family's life. A seasonal opposite of *Carol,* New York City in the winter is traded for rural Italy in the summertime, full of swimming, lounging in the sun, and bike-riding around idyllic Italian towns. The film invites audience pleasure taken from the picturesque, sensory affectivity of warm weather rather than cold. Though Elio and Oliver do begin a love affair– one that seems to happen with the quiet, unspoken consent of Elio's parents– the end of the summer brings the end of the affair, as Oliver returns to the United States. Over a wintertime phone call at the film's conclusion, Oliver reveals he has married a woman, puncturing the bucolic fantasy of the overall film.

In a LGBTQ prestige historical drama that once again puts straight performers on screen but is dependent on queer talent behind the camera, two gay men loom large over the creation of *Call Me by Your Name.* Director Luca Guadagnino, like Haynes, is an openly gay-identifying filmmaker. Although his films– particularly the lavish melodrama with queer undercurrents *I Am Love* (2009) starring queer cinema mainstay Tilda Swinton– seem to resonate with a stylish queer cinematic aesthetic, *Call Me by Your Name* was his first feature film to directly focus on queer sexuality. Guadagnino is Italian and bases his own production company, Frenesy Film Company, in Milan, though the majority of his cinematic work has been English-language.

Having once been quoted as saying "I don't do Italian cinema," Guadagnino is often perceived as a transnational filmmaker "fraught with white, upper-middle-class privilege," seduced by the glamour of Hollywood and detached from his homeland. Perhaps as a result of this perception, his films frequently under-perform against expectations at the Italian box offices (Rigoletto 59).

Another gay man notably involved in the creation of *Call Me by Your Name* was screenwriter James Ivory, himself a notable director who co-founded the influential Merchant Ivory Productions with his partner (in both senses of the word), producer Ismail Merchant. Merchant Ivory Productions was synonymous with prestigious literary adaptations of the work of classic novelists like Henry James and E.M. Forster, outfitted with sumptuous production design and costuming that were received as heritage films in the United Kingdom. The films acquired a cachet of cultural reflexivity, seeing through the national myths similar films would just regurgitate, in part due to the transnational origins of their creators: Ivory was American, and Merchant Indian, the two meeting in India along with their most frequent screenwriter, English ex-pat Ruth Prawer Jhabvala. Merchant Ivory's heyday predates the run of LGBTQ prestige historical dramas profiled in this chapter, and comes just after the period setting of *Call Me by Your Name,* though many of their films– notably *A Room with a View* (1985), *Howards End* (1992), and *The Remains of the Day* (1993), all directed by Ivory, were prestige market hits and Academy Award successes in the United States. All three were queer only on the most sub-textual of levels. Tellingly *Maurice* (1987), their adaptation of Forster's posthumously-published (1971) gay romance, was less successful in garnering a wide viewership, though a clear prototype for films like *Carol* and *Call Me by Your Name.* Ivory's presence in *Call Me by Your Name* indexes a further connection to LGBTQ history amongst the attachment-archive of the film's nostalgia. *A Room with a View*'s scandalous-at-the-time scene of full-frontal male nudity,

with several of the male characters bathing and splashing joyously in a pond, feels echoed in a scene of *Call Me by Your Name* following the discovery of the statuary arm when Elio, Oliver, and Mr. Perlman– underwear on this time– frolic in the lake.

Aside from Ivory's collaboration placing *Call Me by Your Name* within a lineage of prestige historical drama more located to Edwardian England, another attachment-archive looms large over the film as a source of history-tinged pleasure: Greco-Roman classicism. The characters' classicist preoccupations extend to the aesthetic system of the film, as Elio and Oliver walk shirtless amidst crumbling historic architecture in virtual Adonis poses. The opening credits sequence of the film broadly advertises this association. Set to sparkling piano music by John Adams, the names of the cast and primary creatives appear in golden handwriting superimposed over piles of snapshots of Greco-Roman art (Figure 2.9). Occasionally other objects appear in frame– pens, playing cards, envelopes, cigarettes, manuscripts– suggesting these images might represent the casual disordered space of the Perlmans' lazy (but very erudite) summer. The nostalgic pleasures the film proffers are introduced via an immersion in the world of Greco-Roman art.[24]

[24] "Mystery of Love," one of the songs Sufjan Stevens wrote for the film, also includes an allusion to the homoerotic ancient world in its lyrics: "Like Hephaestion who died/ Alexander's lover / Now my riverbed has dried / Shall I find no other?," referencing Alexander the Great and his lover Hephaestion.

Figure 2.9 – The opening credits of *Call Me by Your Name* stress an aesthetic proclivity for ancient worlds.

Call Me by Your Name plays on long-standing associations between gay and lesbian worlds and fantasies of the ancient world. Scott Bravmann in *Queer Fictions of the Past: History, Culture, and Difference* (1997) explores the roots of these historical imaginary systems, cautioning that:

> in their different projects of using ancient Greece as the raw material for fashioning new possibilities for homosexual existence, these conceptual *models* of Greek antiquity have been neither historically inevitable nor politically innocent (49). *[emphasis his]*

Tracing ancient Greece as a kind of "founding myth" for gay men and lesbians, Bravmann finds it is also a founding myth for European civilization writ large, and that its queer invocation "cannot be severed from the larger cultural projects of the fabrication of ancient Greece and the particular set of meanings ascribed to it, including the heavy political and cultural baggage of…theories of civilization, discourses on national survival, and racial belief systems" (50). Whiteness has historically depended upon Greco-Roman fantasies as a justification of inherent

superiority.[25] It's therefore worth questioning if and how the pleasures emanating from classicism contain stray aspects of these belief systems. *Call Me by Your Name,* which appears to validate Elio and Oliver's love through classicist standards of beauty and gay linkages to Greco-Roman fantasy, participates in the same process of cultural negotiation. While whiteness is a component of *Carol*'s beauty aesthetic, the Greco-Roman contexts of *Call Me by Your Name*'s aestheticism suggest classical hierarchies of racial beauty constitute an even more foundational part of the latter film's glamour.

The film's aesthetic of Greco-Roman passion occasionally threatens to obscure the other temporal markers making *Call Me by Your Name* a proper LGBTQ prestige historical drama: the film is set in the 1980s. The '80s are worn lighter in the film than *Carol* wears the '50s, perhaps as a consequence of *Call Me by Your Name*'s closer proximity to its depicted time period. But something about the film appears to aspire to *timelessness* as well, rural Italy's open sunlit ambiance a contrast to the thoroughly *timed* bustle and crowds of 1950s New York City. Sergio Rigoletto connects the "timelessness" of the film to the familiar rhetoric of universalism, where queer love stories are sold to mass audiences with the promise of "universal significance" (58). On the film's fictive, anglophone-inspired gloss of a fantasy Italy, Rigoletto writes:

> Presenting itself to the spectator as a fantasy suspended in time and abstracted from concrete local dimension, *Call Me by Your Name* draws from an idealized imaginary of the *bel paese* [Italian phrase meaning "beautiful country"]: an Italy of sun-kissed piazze, antique churches, and delicious food enjoyed in the garden (66).

[25] Although I do believe that whiteness has an important role in the glamour and marketability of *Call Me by Your Name,* it is an important qualifier that all the main characters in the film are Jewish. Sergio Rigoletto notes that Jewishness has a subtle, complicating effect on the film– Elio mentions that he and his family are "Jews of discretion," which seems to contrast against Oliver's open wearing of a Star of David necklace. Rigoletto concludes that the Star is "a puzzling symbol in the film," positioned similarly to queerness in the film's conversations about identity and visibility (65).

This fantastical suspension has frequently been connected to the film's 1980s setting as well. Bret Easton Ellis designated *Call Me by Your Name* a "post-gay" film, a.k.a one free of prejudice as a defining structure of the narrative, a film that, in Rigoletto's words, "constitutes a clean break with the past as evidenced by the way the film…liberates itself from *the ghosts* that have historically defined homosexual experience in the cinema: the closet, coming-out, fear of not being accepted, AIDS, bullying, or being a victim" (61). I would describe this as an *anti-nostalgic* discourse, one looking to the past not with an ambivalent and amorous backwards gaze but with relief as a tyranny escaped.

Rigoletto butts against this notion by placing the film in a specific tradition of gay male nostalgia for a pre-AIDS 1970s, the film's early 80s summer a perceived "last summer of an era of great freedom, thus hinting at an underlying temporal condition of anticipation" that inevitably curdles to sadness by the film's wintery conclusion (67). I would add that the early 1980s do have a timely role to play in the film's assembly of pleasure, most visibly in a scene at a party with a clumsily dancing Armie Hammer. At an outdoor discotechque with posters of disco balls (a sign of a receding time), Oliver and Elio's friends dance to "Love My Way" by The Psychedelic Furs, a 1982 hit song appropriate to the film's 1983 setting. The 6'5 Hammer looks a little goofy towering over everyone else on the dance floor, in a billowy blue linen shirt tucked-in to preppy white shorts and a brown belt. The camera fetishistically captures his white Converse sneakers and crisp white socks with a red color band. Elio watches from a table nearby, the camera's focus racking in and out as he does, a technique Laura U. Marks indicates as one of the primary cinematic tools meant to instill haptic identification (*The Skin of the Film* 171), but also a woozy suggestion of a boy falling in love. Oliver's period-appropriate dancing hits a blessed middle-ground of the cringe-inducing and the legitimately sensual, his body a conduit for

possibly "regrettable" choices in dance and fashion that become their own erotic spectacle. The film takes pleasure in its period with a nostalgic caress.

But tellingly, bodies are better placed in time when they are clothed, or layered in era-specific pop music, and this moment feels like an outlier in *Call Me by Your Name*'s particular aesthetic of pleasure. Perhaps as part of *Call Me by Your Name*'s "timeless" feel, its haptic vocabulary livens up the most when stroking organic textures as opposed to *Carol*'s preoccupations with the processed and material like leather, glass, and fabric. A pivotal moment in the film's depiction of touching comes as Oliver and Elio's friends are playing volleyball in the yard, while Elio and Chiara spectate. Elio rises from sitting to grab a bottle of water and a piece of fruit. In a series of long-shot compositions, the characters entire bodies are kept in frame, until Oliver races over suddenly from out of frame to grab the water from Elio's hand. Adopting a medium close-up for the first time in the sequence, Oliver's hand massages Elio's shoulder as he drinks the water, the camera focused on the fleshly contact between the two men.[26] When Elio wriggles free, Oliver initiates a more in-depth massage promising "trust me, I'm about to be a doctor [of philosophy]" (Figure 2.10). When Elio responds coldly, Oliver attempts to facilitate a flirtatious moment between Elio and Chiara. Later in the film, Oliver claims this was a sign he was hoping would indicate his sexual interest to Elio, but that "the way you reacted made me feel like I molested you."

[26] After this and the similarly pivotal shoulder-touching moment in *Carol,* it would appear shoulders are the new eminent locus of queer bodily pleasure.

Figure 2.10 – Oliver massages Elio's shoulder.

Call Me by Your Name's brand of haptic homoeroticism is frequently visualized with male shirtlessness, a callback to its hellenic art associations but also removing the boundary of discretion, cover, and play so essential to *Carol*'s haptic homoeroticism. Likewise, although Carol's body in clothing is glamorized as spectacle throughout *Carol,* in *Call Me by Your Name* clothes seem to acquire further significance as pleasure totems when they are *off* the body, such as Oliver's swimsuit Elio sneaks away from his room to smell.

A particular eroticization of the organic powers one of the most notorious moments of the film. Plucking a peach from his family's abundant backyard, the sequence begins with a measured shot of just Elio's hand lightly ripping the peach off a tree, calling forth the association of hands with desire from the archaeological dig at Lake Garda. Elio begins to eat the peach as

he wanders through his stately home, settling down in his bed to read.[27] In the most spectacularly haptic moment of the film, a close-up of the peach sees Elio's fingers trace its textures and crevices, before plunging his finger in towards its center, the peach's very own heart of darkness (Figure 2.11). The sticky peach liquid oozes out of the hole and onto his chest as Elio breaks the pit apart with his hands. Considering the weight and feel of the peach in his hands, Elio begins to masturbate into the peach. After he ejaculates, Elio seems ashamed of this burst of sexual compulsion, and the tone of the film shifts to incorporate what Sergio Rigoletto aptly describes as a "strange, dark affect," different from the sunny romanticism that typically defines the film's cultural profile (70).

Figure 2.11 – Elio's fingers graze the surface of a peach.

Peaches aren't apart from history, the mutations of plant DNA and farming practices themselves dictators of historical change as much as any other realm of human control. But the film's deployment of peaches as a masturbatory aid is one of its strongest indicators of an erotic

[27] Curiously, Elio is reading Joseph Conrad's novella of white imperial madness *Heart of Darkness.* Further analysis should plumb the depths of this association, calling to mind the foreign invader presence the Perlman family has over the Italian land they occupy.

taxonomy favoring the natural world, and the dependable cyclical recurrence of nature in plants and fruit. The film's fantasy of amplified cinematic touch is conceptualized in relation to touching nature and the natural, the skins of both human bodies and fruits. Far from costuming and commodity goods purchased in a 1950s department store, the erotic touching that motivates *Call Me by Your Name*'s pleasure centers grows from the earth. It is not surprising that the film seems similarly fixated on youth, particularly Elio's, as an expression of desire and sexuality in first bloom. For an LGBTQ historical drama, *Call Me by Your Name* seems less attached to what has aged or been found lost in time's archives than to what is eternally growing fresh and new, yet ironically discoverable in the past.

The peach scene as the most spectacular moment of tactility in the film points to an enduring logic tying together the film's other tactile moments. Whereas *Carol* presents haptic images and induces thermal sensations, in *Call Me by Your Name* we are more often shown a human hand in the frame doing the touching, literally representing the tactile provocations *Carol* hopes to emulate from a distance. In line with the films' respective governing aesthetics regarding passion and pleasure, it reveals zealous impatience on *Call Me by Your Name*'s part and delayed theater on *Carol*'s. This distinction recalls Marks' discussion of Deleuzian film theory's invocation of haptics, one whose "focus on filmic images of hands" misses the point of haptic visuality's larger aesthetic practice. Marks continues:

> Looking at hands would seem to evoke the sense of touch through identification, either with the person whose hands they are or with the hands themselves. The haptic bypasses such identification and the distance from the image it requires (*The Skin of the Film* 171).

In Marks' work, she is creating a hierarchy here wherein one form of haptic visual representation is considered more aesthetically effective and politically generative than the other. Regardless of

my agreement, I would like to emphasize, rather than a question of aesthetic superiority, the films' respective haptic visuals as representing different avenues of aestheticized pleasure that, in their affective fulfillment, illuminate ties to larger queer historical imaginaries.

Call Me by Your Name's fixation on youth and age-gap romance calls to mind Carol and Therese, but the film's even younger relationship (17-year-old Elio and 24-year-old Oliver, with Armie Hammer looking significantly older) was the cause of some controversy in its box office release. Conservative actor James Woods campaigned against the film on Twitter, tagging a thread of tweets about it with #NAMBLA, referencing a fringe organization the North American Man/Boy Love Association frequently used by conservative groups to demonize LGBTQ rights platforms (Bloomer). But aside from its deployment within culture war discourse, Jeffrey Bloomer of *Slate* was correct to note "understandable squeamishness" in even progressive reactions to the film, unsure about Oliver's decision to have sex with a teenager, even if one above the legal age of consent in Italy. A *Boston Globe* editorial went further, titled "'Call Me by Your Name' is a dishonest, dangerous film" (Montgomery).

Call Me by Your Name mostly glides over this discomfort by emphasizing Elio's perspective at every turn, making a youthful stab at an imperfect love object something to respond to empathetically, but the film's age-gap and older/younger eroticism remains a taboo context that *Carol* negotiated to far less public interest. Undoubtedly, the potential for danger is larger in Elio and Oliver's coupling than Carol and Therese's, but perhaps this can read as an escalation towards the affective lure of danger. Similar things could be said for *Call Me by Your Name*'s open and unapologetic use of Grecian standards of beauty, problematic resonance be damned. In step with the larger sensory framework of the film, *Call Me by Your Name* seizes hold of similar erotic frameworks as *Carol,* but seems unable to play by the same rules of

subtlety and containment. Refusing a layer of eroticized separation from clear legibility, *Call Me by Your Name*'s potentially discomforting erogenous zones read more bluntly than *Carol*'s. Given that *Carol*'s guardedness also comes off as a strategy of deidealization that becomes its own erotic hinge, perhaps *Call Me by Your Name*'s discomfort rises from the very ways in which it does not seem deidealized.

Carol's pleasures have already "expired" in a traditional sense of timeliness– covert queer social publics of the 1950s lost in time and bracketed by memory narrative frameworks, but the film takes wistful pleasure in this elegant surrender. Tailored into *Call Me by Your Name*'s haptic desires are an inherent hopefulness in the organic over the artificial– the ripe peach, the bloom of youth, gay sexuality free of illness and death– that takes faith in an evergreen recreation of passion. *Carol*'s expiration feels tied to the film's grim (wintry) awareness of the necessity of capital and commerce in facilitating the raw materials of a hopefully transcendent sensory experience of love, whereas *Call Me by Your Name*'s blithe lack of concern (summery) for such structuring issues of power may be a subconscious reason the film provoked a stronger backlash from audiences in its age gap romance, apart from the younger age of its characters. The film's nakedly hungry yearning for pleasure indicates an impatience with the careful diorama construction of give-and-take, reveal-and-conceal pleasure instituted by *Carol*'s visual vocabulary. Perhaps the direct approach yields greater audiences. *Call Me by Your Name* was the more financially successful of the two films, making $43,143,046 worldwide against *Carol*'s $40,272,135. Although *Carol* proved to be the larger financial hit outside the United States, *Call Me by Your Name* beat its domestic box office by over five million dollars.[28]

[28] Box office returns courtesy of Box Office Mojo (boxofficemojo.com), accessed 11/5/23.

At least within LGBTQ culture of the United States, *Call Me by Your Name*'s aesthetic priorities appear to more visibly generate economic worth.

In this way, the films reveal two varieties of mediated pleasure that operate broadly within the confines of the nostalgic, using LGBTQ pasts as fodder for pleasurable sensory activations for the viewer. Svetlana Boym's aforementioned paradigms of nostalgic remembering– the reflective and the restorative– could be said to apply to the films in that order: *Carol* reflecting on the ruins of a vanishing past and *Call Me by Your Name* reaching around for the veins that connect that past to an ample present. But as I said in the introduction to this dissertation, though Boym's binary schematic helps us identify tendencies of the nostalgic imagination, it can't be allowed to foreclose or divide the complicated work of media texts into diminishing "types." What LGBTQ nostalgia does as an affective formation is use media as the means of establishing a felt connection to queer pasts, and it does so promiscuously– reflecting and restoring in an aggregate of desire and mixed dark/light affects. Ironically, *Carol*'s love story ends happily while *Call Me by Your Name*'s ends in the isolation of the closet, two endings we could consider contrary to the overall emotional profiles of their films. This speaks to the surprising, nuanced work of affect, cloaking media texts in attachments of idiosyncratic value. What close analysis of *Carol* and *Call Me by Your Name* reveal are the embodied fantasies through which these attachments are mounted, using vehicles of privilege and calculated mainstream appeal to carry through a connection to LGBTQ pasts, protected as a preciously nostalgic experience.

2.6 **Conclusion: Sensory Immersion in LGBTQ Nostalgia Media Tourism**

The distinct pleasures of *Carol* and *Call Me by Your Name* can be facilitated as immersive experiences in the real world via the industry of media tourism. *Carol* was filmed in

Cincinnati, Ohio, thus rendering its New York City even more of an ephemeral illusion, a precious milieu accessible only via cinematic identification. Still, travel journalism has attempted to lay the bread crumbs to instigate a form of *Carol* time travel. Alongside the film's winter 2015 release, *Condé Nast Traveler* posted an article "How to Experience the Glamorous 1950s Manhattan of Todd Haynes's 'Carol.'" Noting the fictive creation that is the film's Manhattan, the magazine still assured its readers "if you want to embark on your own '50s-inspired Gotham adventure, there are still plenty of old-school spots left in the city. Furs and red lipstick are optional." *Condé Nast Traveler* sent the eager vibe-chaser to a Greenwich Village diner, the Campbell Bar in Grand Central Terminal, the Carlyle Hotel, and a 1920s-era bar in Queens that has since closed at the time of this writing, a further sign of impermanence of these precise desires. The list is completed by Bloomingdale's, the department store that– although thoroughly transformed architecturally since the 1950s– first employed Patricia Highsmith and gave her her own experience of glove-worn transcendence (Scherer).

While efforts to experience *Carol*'s New York replicate the same ephemeral waltz through vanishing fog as the film, *Call Me by Your Name*'s ripe enthusiasm feels similarly echoed in the entire brand of gay tourism the film has indirectly operationalized. An apparently dependable resource for the traveling queer nostalgist, *Condé Nast Traveler* published an article on its filming locations, but unlike *Carol, Call Me by Your Name*'s immersion in chartable rural space also granted it press in British *Vogue, GQ,* and *Lonely Planet.*[29] All promised easy steps to creating your own luxury *Call Me by Your Name* vacation. The small city of Crema in Lombardy– which plays a lonely town square Elio and Oliver wander about, culminating in Elio's first declaration of love– appears in all of the guides, frequently luring in social media

[29] In Works Cited under Medd, Kim, Bull, and Geddo respectively.

influencers seeking Italian charm. The sale of the villa itself that is explored so lavishly in the film was a popular news story, circulating online at the same time as *Call Me by Your Name*'s campaign for major motion picture industry awards (Dangremond). Even more elaborately, travelers to the region can book "The Elio & Oliver Love Tour," a small independent tour with a website outfitted in peach emojis.[30] Starting from the city center of Crema, this car-and-walking tour takes tourists all over Lombardy to various filming locations, with the promise of insider information about the filming.[31] The car plays the soundtrack to the film between stops to ensure guests are *aurally* stimulated as thoroughly as the rest of their sensory passageways to young queer love.[32] A ratable attraction on the popular travel site TripAdvisor, "the Elio & Oliver Love Tour" has received 83 reviews, 65 of them indicating five-star "excellence."

Both films' appearances through the skewed filter of media tourism opportunity speak with surprising clarity to their overall philosophies of nostalgic pleasure. *Carol*'s multitude of interior spaces, and its artificially-constructed nature, indicate strains of elusive passion that can only be accessed through media, as a melancholy reflection of time gone by. *Call Me by Your Name*'s imitation naturalism, in contrast, has left behind a sizable amount of "reality" still standing as relics to be explored, just as Elio and Oliver's love story is most often played out in the seemingly less-controlled wilds of outdoor space. Ultimately both are cinematic works that aspire to instill sensory reaction as a promise exchanged valued in a commercial ecosystem. However, the films' means of articulating and savoring the material tactilities of their desirous worlds– to have and *to hold*– differ in their respective choreographies of erotic fixation. While

[30] Peaches figured extensively into *Call Me by Your Name*'s marketing, in strategies that intriguingly played on sensory extensions. A vinyl release of the *Call Me by Your Name* soundtrack was scented to smell like peaches (Braidwood).
[31] Information taken via their website, https://eliooliverlovetour.com/, accessed Monday October 9th 2023.
[32] I gleaned this from a TripAdvisor review submitted by Caitlin J, "Alberto [tour guide] was warm, relaxed, very friendly and patient as our young adult film nerd companions took endless photos of each location! He even had the soundtrack cued up on the car stereo!" ("Elio & Oliver Love Tour (CMBYN)")

Call Me by Your Name seeks a kind of abundant touch that is faithfully evergreen, *Carol* takes pleasure equally from textural specificity and its absence in hot-and-cold oscillation. The films reflect dual, intermingling discourses of nostalgic pleasure that cohere in LGBTQ worlds beyond the boundaries of prestige cinema, as pleasure heuristics binding to shared histories and cultures with different expectations.

The following chapter explores a similar phenomenon to media tourism– the networked use of media (in the next case, internet technologies) towards the realization of pleasures in the living world. Like the work of haptic visuality, these media invite sensory identifications that link to an aggregate of cultural depth. Touch– often conceived of ahistorically– is in fact very thoroughly historicized within LGBTQ prestige historical dramas– sites of great flights of haptic fancy and visualizations of forbidden intimacy. Queer haptic images' very consistency as a trope has led to its wide recognition and familiar recreation within the popularizing of LGBTQ stories in media, a development both widening its influence and diluting its initial radical potency. Opening these texts to close reading, emphasizing their deidealized natures, illuminates the textuality and coordination of nostalgic pleasure in media, building out an affective formation of nostalgia in LGBTQ worlds that alternately cherishes what has been lost and prays for regeneration. Touch becomes a spectacle that shows the mutual dependence of passion and compromise, melded together as the affection formation of nostalgia in LGBTQ media worlds.

Chapter 3 Analog Cruising: Opaque Temporal Desires and Constructing an Archive on Squirt

Figure 3.1 - Squirt "Retro Sale" advertisement (screenshot taken 8/22/21).

3.1 Introduction: Retro Sale

As I was cataloging various advertisements of the queer hookup website Squirt, I stumbled across one promising a “retro sale” (Figure 3.1). The advertisement features two men, one holding the other in an embrace from behind. The other man shows full genitalia, in a brash

challenge to other social media apps targeting queer men, which prohibit full frontal nudity from user profile pictures (and in advertising) in exchange for placement in the dominant app web stores of Apple and Google. There is a clarity in this advertising: above all else Squirt values the unapologetic depiction of fully naked masculine bodies, complete with unshielded and unrepentant penises. The men are somewhat hairy and tattooed, aligning them with a more rebellious, potentially dangerous masculinity, wearing chain necklaces and adorned with white hats evocative of sailors' caps, embroidered with the Squirt.org logo. The advertisement urges "Get the old price now!," a deal of $89 for a full year membership, down from a more current rate of $109.97.

The sailor hats offer a winningly retro touch, a reference to an immortal icon of queer male desire circulating in sexual imaginaries long before any online technology helped them trend. But seamen cosplay aside, the website's "retro sale" epitomizes the role Squirt provides in a historio-affective discursive system of competing ideas about cruising, hooking up, and queer sexuality in the twenty-first century. Cultural attitudes around queer public sex have changed enormously over time. In the current era, cruising continues but under very different terms than for previous generations of queer people. Digital social media technologies have aided a gradual move towards a more privatized queer sexuality, as documented by Samuel R. Delany, Patrick Califia, and others. Moving sex indoors, to undoubtedly safer contexts, runs the risk of obliterating codes of sexual community history.

Andrew Holleran, the gay writer famous for the 1978 novel *Dancer from the Dance,* wrote about cruising in the New York City-based gay magazine *Christopher Street* throughout the 1970s. In a 1979 essay entitled "Nostalgia for the Mud," Holleran discusses what he sees as a particularly gay affinity for rundown, dilapidated areas of the city, which comprised the majority

of areas notorious for their gay sexual affordances.[33] Gay readers of the time would have received Holleran's words chiefly as a consideration of New York City's infamous waterfront piers. In the essay, Holleran and his friends are observing an art exhibit that is a series of dioramas representing a decaying New York City warehouse district. Holleran writes, lingering on a "squalid" diorama bar, "we looked at the other museum patrons, wondering if they understood, if they *felt* the peculiar magic of this place, its romantic significance. For this was the bar of the past ten years of our lives. It was Love Among the Ruins" (68). Later, as the friends continue chatting outside the museum, one paints a picture of a future New York City, its crumbling piers rebuilt in a revitalized sheen, and a resulting fantastical gay retort:

> "If Westway' is ever built" continued my friend, "and the shoreline made pretty by city planners–when the city is totally renovated, when the gays have restored all the tenements, garden restaurants have sprouted on the Lower East Side, and the meatpacking district is given over entirely to boutiques and cardshops– then we'll build an island in New York Harbour composed entirely of rotting piers, blocks of collapsed walls, and litter-strewn lots. Ruins become décor, nostalgia for the mud" (69).[34]

Reading Holleran's essay today, its prescience for a New York City soon to be reshaped by gentrification has a sense of poignant tragedy, amplifying its titular nostalgia and laying bare

[33] I learned of Holleran's essay through Jonathan Weinberg's *Pier Groups: Art and Sex Along the New York Waterfront* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019). While Weinberg was interested in the article for its demonstrated queer proclivity for "the ruin," I am more compelled by Holleran's creative discussion of artificial ruins. I quote the essay's text from an anthology of *Christopher Street* publications, though the anthology unfortunately does not label the dates of its fascinating essays. It is thanks to Weinberg's book I can credit "Nostalgia for the Mud" to 1979.

[34] Westway was the colloquial name attributed to a 1974 city construction project aimed at knocking down "abandoned" piers (that were lively cruising grounds for the city's gay community) and replacing them with a new highway and new apartments and shopping areas. The plan was widely supported by New York political leaders at the city and state levels, and by President Ronald Reagan in 1981, but it was ultimately aborted in 1985 after delays from several high-profile environmental lawsuits (Amateau).

sexuality's imbrication with cycles of socio-technological change. Intriguingly, the essay places partial onus for the impacts of gentrification onto gay men themselves.

But it is Holleran's suggestion (publishing the thoughts of his friend) of artificial ruins that I find most compelling. The fresh, new construction of "rotting piers, blocks of collapsed walls, and litter-strewn lots," inherent paradoxes, resonates with a witty, camp vernacular of gay expression. But equally, Holleran's prose speaks sincerely to the enduring value to be found in the supposedly obsolescent, a value that is specifically *queer,* and one worth creating out of thin air if necessary. Holleran's imagined island oasis of debris is something worth deliberately creating as a site to continue the productive cultural work of a specifically queer form of antique degradation.

LGBTQ nostalgia media is a genre does exactly that, acting as Holleran's island in the capturing of distinctly aged queer experiences in the face of socio-technological change. It is somehow both old and new. Squirt, a hookup website and the subject of this chapter, is a preserver of the antique methods and practices of cruising, tethering queer sexuality to a sense of place and community in-knowledge against the currents of appified privatization. A social media website situated at a unique crossroads in histories of sexual cruising, Squirt affirms standards of internet-based digital communication, while being in and of the analog habits of traditions of public sex. I use the term "analog cruising" to describe the desire specifically for this form of queer male casual sex, for the word "cruising" alone cannot signify a set of historical sexual practices when cruising continues in remediated fashions and new contexts of technological affordance. Analog cruising (as opposed to digital cruising, which implies the full utilization of locative hookup apps for private, residential sexual encounters) allows the ambivalent activation of digital media as an immersion into past codes of finding queer intimacies in public and covert

spaces, discretion and tact eroticized as sexual languages. It is a residual practice for a digital age, and more and more performative in a moment where streamlined methods of hooking up proliferate in rainbow economies of socially-sanctionable queer sex. Much like the mud of Holleran's "Nostalgia for the Mud," Squirt has a *sticky* functionality, a clumsy, occasionally slow suggestion of the challenges innovation has supposedly cleared out of humanity's path. Here, the mud is re-codified as a desirable feature, not a bug. Although it can be performed as a distinct erotic modality, analog cruising recognizes the persistence of the past upon our contemporary moment, the residual survival of outdated modes of being, and the necessity of their continuation for many communities at intersectional marginalizations.

Jack Parlett indirectly makes a reference to the phrase "analog cruising" in his book *The Poetics of Cruising: Queer Visual Culture from Whitman to Grindr* (2022). Writing about the sense of control and safety the user is offered in digital hookup apps, Parlett concludes "it is thus easy to see why the relative unsophistication of 'analog' cruising becomes its own kind of nostalgic fetish in the face of the digital." He stops shy of using the term as a conjoined phrase– separating it with quotes– undoubtedly in the recognition of cruising as a practice entirely separate from technology. But similar to Parlett's focus on the enduring primacy of visuality in queer male cruising imaginations– through analysis of texts that "reveal that cruising has long been a visual culture where image and self-image play a constitutive role"– my conjoining of "analog" and "cruising" performs a recognition of the transhistorical imbrication of media technologies with cruising cultures as their own proto-social network functionaries (9-10). Squirt's attempted nostalgic time travel renders uniquely visible the *analog* body of cruising's technological manifestation, suddenly revealed as aesthetically retro through the digital communication of the website.

A media public that therefore "sells retro," Squirt is a forum for analog cruising and showcases the negotiation and compromise embedded in this practice, negotiation and compromise felt in the site's formal affectivities. In conducting this research, I obtained a Squirt account, free under their "basic" membership level, and attempted to discern through the website's configuration, features, and advertising what kind of media consumer is being hailed. In their work on lesbian hookup apps, Sarah Murray and Megan Sapnar Ankerson focus the stakes of this kind of research into hookup apps as attention "to the politics and power undergirding the entanglement of technological artifacts, knowledge structures, and cultural and symbolic imaginaries" as well as "the semiotic processes that co-construct sexuality, gender, and queer relationships" (54). Of a similar goal, this research attempts to pinpoint the socio-temporal desires that Squirt services and facilitates, to elaborate an understanding of queer sexuality in the age of social media and its unfinished desires.[35]

Cruising for illicit queer sex in parks, public restrooms, movie theaters, and other public spaces has been a factor of queer worlds throughout time, and an important node in the formation of cultural traditions and shared community knowledge. By labeling a particular style of cruising "analog" I do not mean to suggest it is expired or gone and now in a strictly performative resurrection. As I will elaborate, cruising for many queer people has exemplified a model of sexuality, rooted in discretion and distance from "official" "legible" identities, that can be a safer and more durable mode of being in the world. Discrimination and ongoing violence against

[35] I use "unfinished" here in the tradition of Lauren Berlant in *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (2008), where they discuss the power of sentimentality in fiction and elsewhere to allude to fantasies of an ideal life, one at times "so close that one can experience it affectively without being able to live it objectively." For Berlant the affective energy of sentimentality has unfinished business in its incomplete goals of a non-transformed life, unfinished business that nonetheless serves as "critical pedagogies in the ongoing work of making better good lives *within* a space of belonging that is problematic and virtual but no less affectively sustaining for all that" (31). Similarly, analog cruising does not transform the obsolescence of queer public sex cultures, but it illuminates a desire that persists nonetheless, and a sexual practice that can pleasure within compromised circumstances. LGBTQ prestige historical dramas engage in similar cultural work.

queer people, disproportionately targeting queer people from other marginalized identities, makes the secrecy of cruising as a sexual practice essential for survival. Along these lines, although Squirt is expressly designed for men, and my analysis will often emphasize the site's role in queer male traditions of sexuality, recent research, such as that of J. Logan Smilges, stresses the open-ended nature of these platforms, analyzing Grindr as an app for facilitating casual sexual experiences for trans people and a variety of queer identities, against the app's own stated priorities. Use is inevitably imperfectly aligned with a media text's intentions, and no analysis of sites like Squirt and its role in queer and trans worlds is complete without that sense of nuance. All the same, my focus on the public and affects generated by the site's own form and aesthetics often privileges the imagined queer male user against a larger diversity of identity. More research is needed on the use of sexual networking tools designed for gay men by trans women and other gender variant people, research that would reflect the very blurred intermingled queerness of analog cruising prior to the identitarian turn of the late twentieth century.

The more I researched Squirt, and the idea of an active media public aiming to continue the lifespan of analog cruising methods, rendered desirable *specifically because of their residuality*, the more I came to view analog cruising as a kind of historical re-enactment project, one finding pleasure in the re-creation of historical queer milieus on par with *Carol* and *Call Me by Your Name,* the films of chapter one. But distinct to filmic textualities, the mediated communication of Squirt facilitates embodied in-person performance accorded to an analog code of sexual ethics. Rebecca Schneider describes historical reenactment as "an intense, embodied inquiry into temporal repetition, temporal recurrence" (2). As a thoroughly embodied mode of expression, analog cruising is rooted in the trappings and accessories of a time gone by, perhaps not with period costuming and era-specifc weaponry like historical war reenactors, but with the

same communal memory and codex of signification strategies. Where before I analyzed the use of queer haptic visuals in media as part of the sensory articulation of a desiring subject, here a fantasy of full bodily immersion is suggested by digital technology, and then (for the lucky ones) facilitated in the real world. Researching U.S. Civil War re-enactors, groups of rugged men hiding out in the brush, stroking muskets and cocking hammers, anthropologist Rory Turner writes "Reenacting presents the past, presents history as a usable symbolic resource," a resource "put to service…in representation and acting-out of cultural identity" (54). Here the index of analog cruising is a symbolic resource used to summon queer pasts into the present through embodied sexual practice, resurrected as an affective expression of pleasure and communion with those pasts. Analog cruising may appeal to queer people out of necessity or call to them as an erotic modality; this chapter treats both varieties as the subjects of a nostalgic affective formation.

Stuart Tannock defines nostalgia as "a positively evaluated past world in response to a deficient present world," a past as an idealized zone remembered specifically to fix a lack or absence in the present (454). Under these parameters, Squirt can be seen as revitalizing a queer hookup culture that is too staid or domestic with a sense of radical adventure. But rather than focusing purely on motivation, for this study I define nostalgia as a more open-ended affective binding with a community past, one of a romantic and sentimental nature. Nostalgia is a desired communion with a configured past that is activated in the media user/object relationship. Nostalgia is a plural "pleasuring with…" that is less the fulfillment of a worldview and more a media operation of affective intensity. And the configured past sought by the Squirt consumer responds to the historical archive of community narratives around public sex between men,

which against their changing socio-political climates are the fuel for the tank of analog cruising's nostalgia.

3.2 Queer Public Sex and Changing Social Imperatives

In the pilot episode of HBO's comedy/drama *Looking* (2014), fresh-faced young white urbane gay Patrick (Jonathan Groff) attempts to cruise in a secluded park in San Francisco. Patrick quickly makes eye contact with a breathy, bearded man and pursues him. He quickly finds himself in a foreign world with rules he's violated, speaking too much (no talking!), introducing himself (no names!), and leaning in for a kiss (too intimate!). Clumsy and awkward against the austere arousal of his companion in the brush, the encounter is finally aborted by the mood-killing ring of Patrick's mobile phone, a reminder of contemporary technology in a scene that otherwise could have taken place in a kinky utopian dream of San Francisco as the gay promised land of the seventies. The scene is played for laughs, and later recounted to Patrick's friends as an excursion into another world.

Patrick moves from the forbidden, cringe-inducing realm of cruising to a date arranged through the popular dating site OkCupid with a bland oncologist named Benjamin (Matthew Wilkas). Arriving with embossed business cards in tow, a sharp swerve from the no-name habits of the park, *Looking* encodes a division of varieties of queer male intimacy, each with different standards of identification and behavior. Because one is seen as a comic misadventure and the other a failed prospect, *Looking* emphasizes a hierarchy between the cruise and the blind date. Patrick makes the mistake of revealing he partakes in both worlds– he references his cruising experience in date conversation:

> "I mean, it's San Francisco, right? It shouldn't be so hard to meet cool people in this town…I was so desperate yesterday that I went *cruising* in the park."

Benjamin responds with an incredulous "*Cruising*?," hitting the forbidden word as hard as Patrick first emphasized it, to which Patrick modifies his tone:

> "Well, it was kind of a joke, I was with my friends and we were in the park and we were like 'Do people still really do this?' and it turns out they do."

Having been tainted with the mark of cruising, the date with Benjamin quickly nose-dives and burns out, the oncologist insisting they just aren't compatible. On the subway ride home, a Latino man named Richie (Raúl Castillo) flirts with Patrick, suggesting a special that night at the bar he works, "Pretty blue eyes, drink two for one." When Richie mistakes Benjamin's business card for Patrick's, Patrick rolls with the fallacy and claims he's a doctor. This backfires when Patrick arrives at his subway stop, the real world intervening on their space of queerly romantic liminality. Richie intends to use this business card (and phone number) to establish contact, a misunderstanding Patrick allows, letting this connection flicker out in ephemeral space. But at the end of the episode, Patrick takes initiative to find Richie's bar, cementing their connection with legible identities ("Looking for Now").

This episode of *Looking* emphasizes socially weighted divisions amongst strategies and rituals of queer male connection, assigning both hierarchical values of respectability and a temporalized condition of what is "current." A narrative of queer male respectability politics is laden with a historical narrative about past rituals of queer male sexual connection, and present ones. *Looking* is not a politically incurious text, and does not look at the homonormative blandness of Benjamin the oncologist as the realization of LGBTQ rights dreams achieved, but it

equally does carry judgement towards the public sex acts of its opening sequence. Benjamin may be an unappealing future-present, but the severe self-serious cruising in the park is still an embarrassing past. *Looking* asks in surprise and bemused exhaustion alongside Patrick, "Do people *really* still do this?"

Patrick starts in the cruising grounds, coded as an antique out-of-date environment, reaches a supposed here-and-now presentness of queer dating aided by media technology, and then experiences another discreet flirtation in public. The encounter with Richie on the subway is almost presented as a happy medium of the two– lacking the stiff formality of the blind date, but also the blunt carnality of the cruising opening sequence. The histories of gay male respectability, intertwined with the social privileges ascribed to whiteness, illuminate the racial context of *Looking*'s encounters as well: seeing the white man on a proper date vs meeting the Latino man in less controlled public space.[36] Queer media seeks out forms of compromise between past and present structures of feeling, presented here on television series in a similar vocabulary taken up by digital and online media. Both enact a semantic field of the histories of queer hookup cultures.

George Chauncey's landmark text *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* affirmed the centrality of urban spaces to the development of a queer male public sphere, wherein by necessity public spaces were places of sexual connection. Tracing the fragmentary creation of something akin to a locatable gay culture for emergent queer men towards the end of the nineteenth century, Chauncey details the

[36] Kevin Mumford writes in *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (Columbia University Press, 1997) of cities' early twentieth century identity as spaces of commingling across traditional racial, sexual, and gendered boundaries due to shared perceptions of "low life," experimentation permitted by presumed "low" moral character. *Looking* emphasizes its city setting– via the subway– when bringing white Patrick in connection with the Latino Richie, also coded as working class, in its depiction of a gentrified San Francisco.

"overlapping social networks in the city's streets, private apartments, bathhouses, cafeterias, and saloons" identifying an inextricable link between public spaces and the formation of queer identities (2). Public spaces were the terrain for explorations of queer sexuality, leading to the bare materials of gay culture.

Samuel R. Delany later paid tribute to urban configurations of public sex between men, less as an anticipation and formation of gay male culture, and more as a space of queer potential that blurred traditional sexual categories. In his book-length essay *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, Delany details memories of public sex acts in commercial pornographic theaters from the 1970s onward, building an argument about structures of contact in urban environments within classed contexts. Bearing witness to the fall of a golden age of porn theater sex, Delany notes a 1985 health ordinance closing bathhouses and other commercial outlets of gay sexuality due to panic over the HIV/AIDS crisis (15), resulting in the steady eviction of pornographic theaters and their associated cruising habits over the next decade (91). Outlining a shift in patterns of relating (not just for queer people, but people in New York City generally) from structures of "contact" to "networking," Delany describes a transition between casual chance encounters– across class, racial, and sexual boundaries– to a pre-determined corporatization of relating, suffocating the queer culture around cruising and public sex. The enormous community trauma of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the mid-to-late 1980s and early 1990s spiked fear and shame in the reputation of public sex practices, emotions that linger to this day.

Across the country in San Francisco, Patrick Califia had been writing about the same topics, public sex and queer cruising cultures, since the late 1970s, often for a column in *The Advocate,* a long-running LGBTQ magazine. Califia came out as a bisexual trans man in 1999, but during the bulk of his work on San Francisco's cruising cultures he identified as a lesbian

woman, suggesting a queer community respect and ethical commitment to public sex cultures that encompassed more than just queer men.[37] A year prior to New York City, 1984 saw the closure of bathhouses and outlets of gay sexuality by San Francisco mayor, and later California senator, Dianne Feinstein (Califia 2000 5). The HIV/AIDS crisis had made support for San Francisco's lively public sex cultures untenable, resulting in an environment of fearful backlash that even extended to the publication of the names of men arrested in police crackdowns on known cruising areas (Califia 2000 6). *The Advocate* ended Califia's column in the early nineties, a move he attributed to the same attacks on public sex on the east coast traced by Delany, evident in the privatizing impetus emergent in the transition from contact to networking (1994 xxiv). Califia wrote in 2000:

> Throughout the '70s and '80s, the 'gay family' consisted of the entire community. There was a strong sense that an injury to one was an injury to all. Gay baths and backroom bars were part of a system of territorial marking that delineated the boundaries of our neighborhoods. This was important because it made the community palpable. We had territory that we could defend…Today's gay family is an isolated couple committing to its own financial success and perhaps a desire to raise a child. The emphasis on monogamy and long-term couples has created a less radical style of activism (7).

The potential of urban space, once so conducive to the formation of nascent queer publics, had been radically cut short by a change of mindset that favored respectability politics of non-

[37] Jonathan Weinberg's research on the queer cultural memory of cruising at New York City's piers included some participation from queer people beyond queer men as well. Morgan Gwenwald, a photographer notable for her work documenting lesbian BDSM cultures in the 1980s, also took many photographs of NYC pier cruising destinations. She wrote to Weinberg that she did "miss those piers, they were not a part of my life, and I did regret lesbians did not have such a space. They whispered dreams and adventures to you as you passed them, they held that special space in our imagination." Weinberg notes that from Gwenwald's comments we can understand that, even for a queer person who was not entirely welcome at the piers based on their gender, within queer worlds cruising still "exerted fascination and stimulated longing among people who never participated in it" (14).

confrontational monogamous sexuality and privatized sex behind closed doors. This was not only aligned with fears of HIV in the public imaginary, but also coincident with the growth of LGBTQ businesses seen as seeking and branding a more normative-friendly LGBTQ consumer, the cultural moment of homonormativity. Califia wrote that it seemed queer publics had traded "censorship by the chief of police…for a more subtle form of social control by Absolut Vodka" (1994 xxiii).

Internet technologies enter this already fraught debate of respectability and LGBTQ politics as a technological shift with significant effects for the rituals and organization of queer social life, especially as it applies to casual sex. In 2010, Sharif Mowlabocus published *Gaydar Culture: Men, Technology, and Embodiment in the Digital Age* to take stock of the changes in queer male social ritual after the rise of online dating and hookup cultures, with research situated primarily in the United Kingdom. Mowlabocus strikes an optimistic tone initially, imagining a queer world where analog and digital exist side by side, writing of Brighton, the UK's "gay capital":

> Despite gloomy predictions that the Web would eradicate traditional cruising grounds, the briefest of walks along Hove Lawns or down to Duke's Mound on a summer's evening will illustrate that these are by no means redundant spaces, and they have not been vacated by men seeking sex with other men. However, the introduction of firstly domestic and then mobile Internet access, has served to build upon traditional notions of cruising, and similar changes that have occurred across gay male subculture as a result of digital ICTs [information/communication technologies] (*Gaydar Culture* 5).

This passage displays faith in the enduring appeal of the analog, with cruising in public parks, restrooms, and other urban locations continuing unabated. Online media's entrance into gay life

can “build upon” the traditional rituals of public sex, but the bedrock of cruising remains the same. Mowlabocus’ use of the word “vacated” is interesting in this context, applying a figurative spatial dimension to queer male practice with a mentioned fondness for its location-based root: Hove Lawns and Duke’s Mound, known areas that serve as calling cards and meeting places for queer sexual activity.

But the effects of time and the impact of a fully digitized new media brand of cruising were indeed vacating; the dire economic situations of the remaining gay and lesbian bars around the world are a testament to that. Evangelos Tziallas describes the ethos of queer hookup apps as operating under the allure of a less fixed-in-space queer community: “No need for the gay village, the gay village revolves around you!” (763). This eroding of a more classic understanding of queer community, the “system of territorial marking” Califia described, opens up possibilities for LGBTQ desire, as hookup apps and dating sites extend networks of pleasure previously open to those urbane and in the know. But at the same time, it functions as part of the very homonormative shift from contact to network Delany warned of, a less radical and less fluid understanding of queer sexuality. And given app-mediated sex increased the potential for safer affairs behind closed doors, the entire historical ritual of cruising in public space, and dependable landmarks, areas known to facilitate queer connection, are in danger of being lost to time.

All the same, even as spaces can be vacated, practices can remain, remediated and modified out in other realms and contexts. Recent research has focused on how the form and shape of online cruising and hookup apps are changing patterns of cruising and queer connection. Jody Ahlm offers an important nuance to the thesis implied by Delany and Califia that the movement of cruising and public sex to more privatized forms of sexual connection would lead to more conservative sex practices. Ahlm argues that apps like Grindr have led to the

rise of a sexual ethic called "respectable promiscuity…where publicness and privateness co-exist, creating tensions for self-presentation that are structured by contemporary sexual politics." The various uses of the app, largely by queer men, "allows for plausible denial of promiscuity" and any scarlet letter of shame associated with it, but at the same normalizes casual sex (365). Stigma remains, but it's defused by the efficiency of app-coordinated sex.

A new ethos of respectable promiscuity stops a truly apocalyptic sense of queer worlds coming to an end with the eradication of public space, and reminds us of the endurance of queer connectivity in remediated form. But there is still the fear that an intangible "community" has been lost in the turn to privatization. Sam Miles's research on the use of Grindr in London revealed a halcyon ideal of gay villages of the past dominating his interviews with users, located specifically to the London neighborhood of Soho. The nostalgic tone of these conversations configures a heyday of gay community whose time has certainly passed and found replacement. Miles writes:

> With the ongoing deconcentration and commercial redevelopment of previously queer-coded physical space in London, the idea that sociality and community can be reconfigured online is persuasive…Yet aside from the sense of community promulgated by heavy use amongst a subsection of users, community as a whole was not widely attributed to locative apps, and nor was it significantly in evidence in embodied scenarios. This paucity seems not to be attributable to the wide demographic range of users so much as a subjectively desired but mostly unrealised conception of community amongst users. Thus the potential for online sociality is qualified by its co-option as a tool to pursue sexual encounter (1602).

LGBTQ sexual hookup apps appear not to be a place to find "community," at least not the kind that compels a larger queer cultural fantasy. "Subjectively desired but mostly unrealised" is the affective echo of the immense vitality generated by queer public sex cultures. It is a desire that was urgently defended by a prodigious corpus of literature from Delany, Califia, and others. Both Ahlm and Miles are clear that the evaporation of queer community is not an inherent or automatic effect of the online dating/hookup app moment, that indeed there are many creative ways in which digital media can further the ritual of queer public sex. But Ahlm argues that "public sex is beyond the queer liberal imagination," and that though the potential is there, the immediacy of the option of privatized sex proves irresistible. She continues, "The logics of queer liberalism structure both users' rational choices about how to use the app as well as their perceptions about what the app is for," and that building queer community does not appear as an available function nor purpose within hookup app technologies (376-377).

Is analog cruising thus doomed to discontinuation? Flickering embers can still have immense significance for the emotional color and social drive of contemporary media. After all, Patrick in *Looking* explored queer sexual connection occurring between layers of different practices associated with temporal and power-based values: supposedly shameful cruising of the past vs technology-engineered dating of the present. Raymond Williams separates temporality into layers of the "dominant" and its two waxing and waning layers, the "residual" and the "emergent." Williams describes the residual as

> effectively formed in the past but…still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present. Thus certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practised on the

> basis of the residue– cultural as well as social– of some previous social and cultural institution or formation (122).

The persistence of the past is essential to understanding the cultural presence of antique social practices in the contemporary moment. Media, which is already theorized as a means of freezing something in time and capturing a world apart from the flow of time, plays a key role in that process.[38] Writing about photography, Michelle Henning notes the inseparable nature of technological adaptation and social relations, enflaming political contexts of power and access. Henning writes that "obsolescent media become politically significant in a society where newness has become linked to social distinction and dominance" (57) and the continued presence and use of the obsolete can be used to "smash this ideology of progress" (59). The dominant and the residual are in competition with one another and fashion social relations torn between alternate rituals of media use. Applied to LGBTQ worlds, this creates a powerful sense of nostalgia tied to the queer past of cruising.

How one particular website navigates this affective history dynamic, and makes it graphic in media textuality, is the subject of the next section. In a publication roughly simultaneous to his work on *Gaydar Culture,* Sharif Mowlabocus also published an article on "cybercottages." ephemeral revivals of analog cruising habits on community-maintained websites lacking any formal company structure like the emerging Gaydar and Gay.com that would become the subject of his book.[39] Mowlabocus reads these spaces, taking the form of mailing lists or discreet, difficult-to-find web addresses, as "questioning and

[38] see Mary Anne Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, and the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
[39] "Cottage" is British slang for public restrooms, particularly used when in the context of cruising and public sex cultures. It's also often formatted as a verb, "cottaging." They are also called "tea rooms." The use of these words, the very Canadian "washroom" included, are some of the only markers of Squirt's non-U.S. anglophone identity, for users like myself viewing the site from U.S. gay subculture.

queering…visibility" ("Revisiting Old Haunts…" 435), wrapped up in a "nostalgia for the cottage" even users may not consciously recognize ("Revisiting Old Haunts…" 433). He also notes the difficulties of researching these sites, writing "cybercottages that flourished for several weeks often fell into disuse, abandoned by those who had created and dwelt within them. This instability echoes the 'real' cottage, which is rarely a stable– or safe– site of queer activity" ("Revisiting Old Haunts…" 421). Squirt represents a further move into stability for this particular hailing of residual passion for the nostalgic queer consumer. Occupying much of the same ethos as the cybercottages, Squirt modifies their techno-social parameters in an act of compromise.

3.3 Squirt, Compromise, and the Stewardship of Queer Sexual History

Squirt is owned and operated by the Pink Triangle Press (PTP), a Canadian company that itself reflects a timeline of challenges faced by queer populations, shifts in cultural priorities, and the tightly-knit co-presence of technology and sexuality. Although not officially formed as a non-profit press until 1976, the group that would become the PTP began publishing a gay liberation newspaper *The Body Politic* in Toronto in 1971. Similar to the aforementioned trajectories in New York City and San Francisco, Toronto's gay press spent the 70s and 80s dogged by controversy over sexually explicit material and association with taboo sexual practice, particularly Gerald Hannon's articles on sex between men and underage boys (Jackman 18) and a later series on fisting, also a theme of Patrick Califia's work in *The Advocate* (Jackman 20). *The Body Politic,* financially precarious from obscenity lawsuits and ongoing public attacks, ceased publication in 1986. But the PTP had another publication, *Xtra!,* a shorter "four-page bar rag" first intended in 1984 as promotion for *The Body Politic* that received stronger advertising support (Jackman 21). *Xtra!* continued on at an expanded size and bi-weekly rate, just as

sexually provocative as its predecessor, reaching a circulation height of 22,000 printed copies for its December 27 1991 edition (Jackman 24). *Xtra!* eventually ceased print publication in 2015, but continues on as a website.

Although the PTP retained this focus on journalism, its profit center shifted over time. In 1990, the press created Cruiseline, a telephone chatline and listing of audio classified personal advertisements. Ten years later Squirt was launched, creating a new revenue stream for PTP based on membership fees. Squirt is free to use once a user sets up an account, but privileges and further access are unlocked via subscription to the "Fan Club," including unlimited profile views, unlimited email, unlimited access to cruising listings, and the ability to see who has viewed your profile. Technological and economic structures have required these shifts in the PTP's products, and they reflect changing focalizations of queer connectivity, queer public spheres, and media industries.

Squirt is similar to other social media websites, with live chat functions and a directory of users, mostly male-identifying people looking for casual sex encounters. The site also includes message boards and sections for member-authored erotica and erotic videos. But one of the more signature features of Squirt is an extensive database of cruising locations, revealing the unique historical motivation of the site: archiving the nebulous art of analog cruising. Cruising location listings are initially presented to users limited to the zip code they entered tied to their profile, though the database is also searchable based on any zip code the user wishes to enter. Users can search for cruising locations across eleven categories:

- Bars, Clubs
- Gyms

- Washrooms, Cottages
- Truck Stops, Rest Areas
- Beaches, Hot Springs
- Hotels, Resorts, Campgrounds
- Bathhouses, Saunas
- Parks
- Cruising Areas
- Groups – Nudist, JO[40], Leather, etc
- Theatres, Bookstores, Sex Shops

There is an across-all functionality to ensure you only see locations that include Glory Holes. This rooting in physical location marks Squirt as immediately divergent from the other internet technologies facilitating queer sexual connection, which, in Evangelos Tziallas's words, strive to have "the gay village revolve around you" rather than the other way around (763). Yet it is still a website, and reflecting the PTP's habit of modernizing with new successive forums of queer cultural interplay, this demonstrates a basic acquiescence to the digital turn and its associated rituals of sociality. Squirt reflects a position of compromise between the nostalgic fantasy of queer past and the demands of the present. In Ben Light's previous study of Squirt (2016), focused more on the anonymous nature of the Squirt's profiles and articulating a theory of

[40] "Jerk-off," "jack-off," etc, mutual masturbation groups.

"pseudonymous publics," Light mentions this temporal compromise as well, describing the site's in-between straddling of traditional "public sexual cultures" and "the network community elements" of dating sites and hookup apps (235).

At the bottom of Squirt's homepage, a small link labeled "Resources" directs users to an array of links all motivated towards educating the cruiser on a wealth of historical tactics and traditions that define analog cruising. In "Dick Hunter's Cruising Tips," Squirt offers a lengthy guide outlining the structure of its residual practice. "Dick Hunter's Cruising Tips" branches off into 11 sub-chapters: "General Tips," "The Baths," "The Gym," "Parks and Car Parks," "Restrooms, Tearooms, and Cottages," "Adult Video Arcades, Adult Bookstores, etc.," "Glory Holes," "Cruising Online" (Figure 3.2), "Cruising Etiquette," "Cruising Safety," and "Safer Sex Tips."

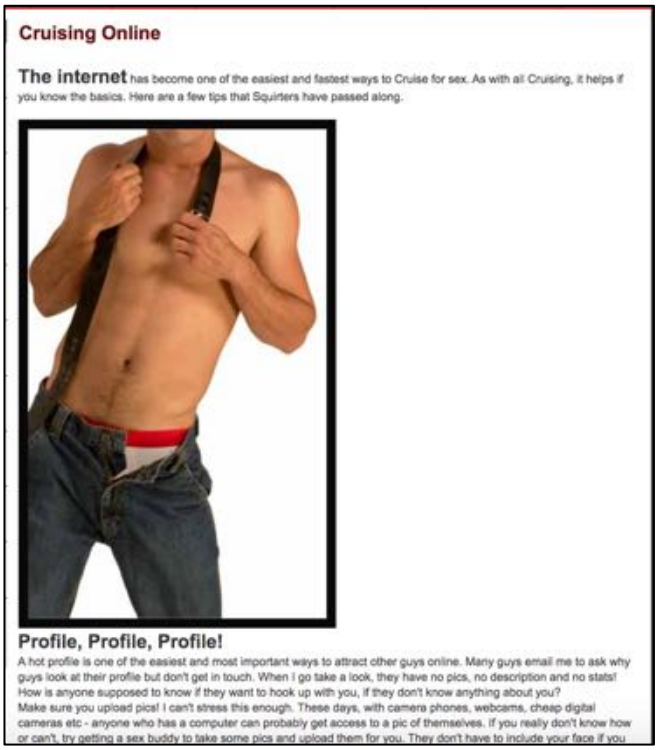

Figure 3.2 - "Cruising Online" entry of Dick Hunter's Cruising Tips (screenshot taken 12/15/16).

This clear attempt to sell a textbook overview of cruising epitomizes the curative strategy of Squirt: recording a history of word-of-mouth tips, merging the art of analog cruising with digital networks of transmission. [41] Guides to cruising spots had been circulated in queer media worlds before, such as Bob Damron's annual survey of gay hotspots in San Francisco *Address Book,*

[41] This is evocative of Will Fellows' book *A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004) where gay men's love for antiquing and historical preservation is examined. Fellows describes gay men as acting as "priests of aesthetics and cultural preservation" (256).

which began publication in 1965 and started including guides to “cruisy areas” in “parks, beaches, and other public grounds” in 1972 (Espinoza 78–83). But Squirt’s online reach, across borders and beyond urban environments, constitutes an even more ambitious archiving of knowledge.

The page labeled “General Tips,” essentially an abbreviated summary of “Cruising Etiquette,” identifies the following nine headings as the keys to the kingdom of cruising perfection:

> Make Eye Contact
>
> If there’s good eye contact, give him a sign!
>
> Show some skin, show some cock!
>
> Assume the position!
>
> Start a conversation
>
> Who wants what? Telling the feeders from the eaters
>
> Make use of technology!
>
> Use your surroundings
>
> Don’t always judge a Cruiser by his appearance!

The “Make use of technology!” section can only go so far, re-stating the features of the site and ending with a hopeful assurance, “Stay tuned for further Cruising tech tools on Squirt- including GPS coordinates, better maps, directions, and greater mobile access to Cruising locations!”

Within this guide the writer speaks from an expressed position of authority, offering the totalizing guide to cruising as practice, without sacrificing a tone of friendly casual familiarity. In the section on "The Gym," the writer admits of public nudity, "Personally, I find this to be a real turn-on!" inviting the reader into one man's very specific experience and reaction to analog cruising. A user's impression of the writer is that of a seasoned, experienced daddy of the parks, bathhouses, locker rooms, and saunas, graciously bestowing his wisdom upon the world.

Each cruising site is described at length in a profile page, with a linked Google Maps location and GPS coordinates. Scrolling through the locations on my computer, one of the entries close from where I'm writing is the men's restroom of a flagship department store at a popular mall.[42] Cruising locations are organized on the initial search results page first by recency of use, hoping to direct searchers to the pages that have the most views and active comment sections. This department store restroom was first posted on Squirt as a cruising spot of interest by a user on June 5th, 2018, receiving updates to its profile page in February 2021 (updates to cruising listings are made via an email form to the website's team). With a pictured row of empty stalls, Squirt's entry on the location notes "Front side of stalls go to the floor for total privacy" and that the "Floors are clean and shiny so you can see shadows very well." This is an affordance of Squirt's webpage system that uses the digital to foster analog negotiation of physical space, intermingling in compromise digital efficiency and analog attachment. The profile page describes directions to the location, the typical clientele ("Variety - all ages"), dangers to avoid ("Cleaning people make occasional rounds.") and the best times to cruise ("Lunch - mid-afternoon and evenings, too."). Each page also features information for disabled users regarding

[42] I've been discreet about the location to protect the opacity of the cruising erotics. It could be argued that the mall location of this cruising site is its own further antiquity, the diminishing popularity of enclosed shopping malls echoing analog cruising's own antiquity.

the space's accessibility, a feature perhaps indicative of the diverse users of Squirt. Each page has a comments section that is the preferred mode of open advertising to other queer people nearby, a prodigious pileup of comments such as: "Here," "Here now," "Here today," "Someone come play," and "Anyone?" These calls most often go unanswered in the comments section, but hopefully result in private messaging between individual users.

The "Cruising Info/Tips" section of each location page is more open-ended and varies by entry, ranging from practical information to more descriptive recountings of the dynamics of a typical cruising encounter. The department store restroom entry reads:

> Depending on the day it can be busy. Typically, you will see a guy walk in a stall and pull down his pants and can notice the shadow of his cock being rubbed from the shiny floors. If you're in the stall next to him, tap your feet or show the shadow of your cock to let him know you're interested. There's a handicap stall for more room to play at the end.

Descriptions of this sort, rarer than the more utilitarian directions, are nonetheless illustrative of the general tone Squirt takes vis a vis its users and the backdrop of queer sexual history. Knowledges that were once ephemeral or passed via word of mouth in quiet underground conversations are codified in online text to be transmitted widely. Something as transient as the play of penis shadows on the floor is given a sense of predetermined social script, and a sense of heritage. Implicit in this lengthy description and deliberate archiving is an attempt to touch the past through fastidious recreation of the arts of cruising. In her work on historical reenactors, Rebecca Schneider describes the motivation for their immense discipline and research: "if they repeat an event *just so*, getting the details as close as possible to fidelity, they will have touched time and time will have recurred." Through "a radically rigorous mimesis," the recreator "can

trip the transitivity of time" (10). Squirt's positioning as a how-to resource, encouraging sexual behavior that is inevitably aged in a culture threatening it with obsolescence, facilitates this encounter with time. Squirt is a pedagogical source educating "how to be gay" in these specific rituals, using media to transmit a historical record of the protocols and habits of cruising. [43]

In this way, Squirt is similar to Samuel R. Delany's *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* in its determined and exhaustive accounting of cruising: both lend through textuality a stabilizing record for ephemeral and fleeting affective connections. Delany is wary of nostalgia at several points throughout *Times Square,* suggesting nostalgia requires "an uncritical confusion between the first, the best, and the youthful gaze…with which we create origins" (16).[44] Such rose-colored glasses, associating the past version of something with "the best," are for Delany a viewpoint incompatible with the realities of public sex in New York City's pornographic theaters. *Times Square* recounts stories of pleasure and eroticism alongside equally foundational references to economic precariousness and the unstable mental health conditions of many of its cruisers. Delany emphasizes this point again in the "Red" section of the book, when networking's takeover of contact as the dominant sexual/social structure of feeling threatens to create too neat a binary of thinking.[45]

[43] Referencing the book *How to Be Gay* by David M. Halperin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2014).
[44] Finding resistance to the "stain" of nostalgia by people I would otherwise confidently label nostalgists has been a familiar part of this dissertation research. Even the civil war reenactors studied by Rebecca Schneider are similarly nostalgia-averse: "Most seemed deeply eager not to come off as ignorant of history, or as 'bumbling idiot sentimentalists,' as one interviewee put it, or 'nostalgia-heads' as another laughingly said" (51).
[45] Recounting his grandmother's relationship with her landlord, and their sharing of social public space in a way that seems to have ended in much of contemporary society, Delany writes "I do not think it is in any way nostalgic to say that under such a social practice as my grandmother knew, both landlord and tenant maintained better relations than I do with my landlord today" (120).

But with nostalgia as a mode of pleasuring with and attaching to past, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* is a very nostalgic text, evoking a twilight of fading sexual experimentation that Delany expresses a great deal of love for. As Delany recounts one sexual partner:

> …a scrawny, wholly unexceptional looking black man in his late thirties named Jeff. On the street, other than to note that he's probably homeless, you wouldn't give him a second look. In a public rest room, at Penn Station or Port Authority, however, when he stands before a urinal, slouched a leisurely eight to ten inches back from the porcelain fixture, I've never seen anyone *not* at least glance in his direction– astonished, with opening mouth and blinking eyes (12).

On one level this passage is a bawdy reference to impressive genitalia, Delany slipping a sexual smirk into a frequently sober book. But he's also expressing a kind of honor, a man's move from "unexceptional" to something more within the context of rituals of queer male cruising and public sex, a dignified respect that then gains *another layer* by virtue of ending up in a published book. The mundane is now a subject of erotic record, cataloged in sexual perpetuity. Squirt follows the same function, providing a role of stewardship to queer sexual history, in-between analog and digital media flows.

In the "Parks and Car Parks" section of cruising tips there is a telling and demonstrative sub-section specifically on male truckers. The writer attributes a near mythic status to "long-distance truckers" as familiar stalwarts of analog cruising, with "their own following of cock-hungry guys waiting to service hot trucker cock at every opportunity." Anne Balay in her work on LGBTQ truckers mostly affirms this view, writing "There is a long history of both escape and pleasure linked to the road, and much of that pleasure involves same-sex encounters and gender variance" (185). In Balay's book, LGBTQ trucker culture poignantly holds similar values as the

stalwarts of analog cruising, drawn to a "lone-wolf, rebel" mystique and the anonymity of constant travel, linking the two worlds as allies in the truck stop restroom (4). Squirt's cruising guide relays one significant tip sent in by a user:

> Get the trucker's attention by purchasing a cheap C.B. radio, get on a channel and say something like 'BJ 25.' Then, go to channel 25 and wait for a reply, which is generally a few clicks on the mic. Truckers looking for cock will get the message and meet you on the channel you indicated. He [user sending in the tip] goes on the warn, though, that a lot of truckers are straight and travel with female companions- so you should use discretion when talking over open air to avoid any trouble.

Balay notes that citizens band (CB) radios are more and more a passing antique, replaced by cell phone technology by most trucking companies, and existing in "a cloud of nostalgia" where CB "slang persists as a means to create community" without much occupational utility (10-11).[46] CB Radios, like the cruising spots and methods utilized by Squirt's users, are for some a fact of life or trade and not a performative aesthetic choice. But all the same, the section's residency here in Squirt's cruising guide displays an attention to residual tools of communication considered "outdated" in the contemporary moment. On Squirt, residual technologies are vital components of the site's nostalgic attachment-archive, an archive for which the website is the curator, acting as a bridge for queer sexual past to the present. But rather than just a sentimental feature, being antique is a key to Squirt's overall eroticism and its draw to consumers, operationalizing queer

[46] In contrast to Squirt's hyped affection for CB radios, several of the LGBTQ truckers participating in Balay's study express fear and concern with any queer signaling on the C.B. platform, as it could potentially lead to homophobic violence (114, 126). The concern for possibly disclosing your location to violent homophobes outweighs any theoretical pleasure the technology could facilitate.

nostalgia as a textual property. Queer nostalgia is an erotic media modality and opacity is its frequent language of choice, through which Squirt is sold as an affective retreat to the past.

3.4 Queer Opacity as an Eroto-Nostalgic Media Modality

The logo of Grindr is a mask (Figure 3.3). The dominant media technology arranging casual sexual connection amongst queer people (principally queer men) announces itself with a black mask and a yellow/black color scheme that has changed over several re-designs.[47] In 2011, the aforementioned *Xtra!* interviewed the creator of Grindr Joel Simkhai. When asked for details about the design and intentionality behind his app, he explained the name Grindr is reference to a coffee grinder– "We're mixing people up together, a bit of a social stew. It is a little bit rough– not to mix, but to grind." He emphasized the masculinity driving Grindr's aesthetic choices and colors. The mask of Grindr initially had several small columns jutting out of the bottom of the mask, intended to reference a kind of masculine industrial feel, ultimately replaced with a more streamlined complete mask.[48] When asked about the mask, Simkhai mentioned his interest in the "tribal arts in Africa and Polynesia," seeing the mask as a way into the "primal" desires underlying the app's functionality: "We looked at this notion of meeting people and the idea is

[47] The current Grindr logo (as of 11/13/23) inverts the black and yellow coloring (yellow mask, black background) while maintaining the same basic color scheme.
[48] It's hard not to think of the sites of industrial wreckage that define so many of New York City's famed cruising destinations, profiled in Holleran's "Nostalgia for the Mud." Here their presence seems almost subliminally worked into Grindr's design.

very much a basic human need to relax and to socialize…[the iconography of masks] brings us back to basics, primal needs. Socialization is the basis of humanity" (Salerno). Simkhai's appeal to the "primal" here raises associations with the sexual racism frequently displayed by white men on apps like Grindr, alternately fetishizing racial difference as exotic or refusing users of color as romantic potential altogether with demeaning racist phrases like "No asians" or "I don't like chocolate."[49] The presumptive white gaze and its associated exoticizing thrust is not only a fact of life online, it's sketched into the very aesthetics of Grindr's interface.

Figure 3.3 – The Grindr Logo.

The association with masks that did not come up in Simkhai's interview was that of secrecy, deception, protection, and opacity. Masks hide identity. They're a front used to conceal, but can also be a performative space, ranging from the unadorned utilitarian use of a blindfold to a grand Venetian masquerade mask overflowing with feathers and sparkling femme adornment. Masks can bring a great deal of fey exuberance to an otherwise normative performance of self. The mask's baseline reference to the threshold of secrecy/transparency, and private/public, makes it a symbol highly evocative of sexuality's cultural baggage and weight, tied up with various cultural definitions of gender, sex, and epistemological proof, explored at length in Eve Kosfosky Sedgwick's work in *Epistemology of the Closet* and elsewhere. But a mask can also be taken on and off: the wearer holds some degree

[49] See Chong-suk Han and Kyung-Hee Choi, "Very Few People Say 'No Whites': Gay Men of Color and the Racial Politics of Desire," *Sociological Spectrum* 38:3 (2018) 145–161.

of choice in this. The donning of a mask can even be pleasurable, as a willed escape to a queered identity slightly blurrier than the confines of a functioning subjectivity.

Grindr's mask, despite its technological platform's suitability for anonymity, ends up as a surprisingly ironic iconography for a brand increasingly tied to queerness as the performance of clear and tangible identities. Grindr forbids explicit nudity in its profile pictures (another kind of masking), while Squirt encourages it. Scrolling through Squirt profiles the dominant visual is square after square of penises in close-up, detached from any clearer identification. Meanwhile, the discursive system in which Grindr exists values pictures of faces, unmasked, as a sign of membership and a kind of homonormative citizenship. A 2015 article on pride.com entitled "What Your Grindr Profile Pic Says About You" gave only a passing glance towards non-face profile pics before turning to deeper distinctions between face or full body pics: in formal wear vs. casual clothes, location, facial expression, etc. The author also warns against being "Mr. No Pic," a mark of shame and a lower place on a vaguely configured Grindr hierarchy: "Being discreet is all fine and dandy, but at least put some effort into it" (Zane). Apps like Grindr insist on a kind of user visuality that is frequently absent in the more text-based Squirt, a distinction of aesthetic priority that carries a historical weight of the risks of being visible and queer.

Sharif Mowlabocus further dissects the various pressures and energies in the construction of profile pictures on gay hookup apps. He writes:

> A face-pic demonstrates your investment in this space and your willingness to openly identify as gay or bisexual…Thus within the architecture of *Gaydar* [UK-based gay hookup app] we can hear echoes of the GLF [Gay Liberation Front, UK-based activist group]'s rallying cry…to 'come out' and 'be proud'…The face-pic articulates issues of self-identification, honesty, and integrity and many users value this form of self-

> representation most highly, not least because they see it as validating the profile; to many it is an act of investment and confirmation that can never be afforded a faceless profile (*Gaydar Culture* 103).

Mowlabocus' outline of the politics of self-representation that attach to the face pic is critical for understanding the dynamics of queer male identity in online media spaces. A rhetoric of "out of the closet," inevitably linked to homonormative identification with the gay mainstream, motivates the face pic as a clear symbol of moving past the shame of the closet. An artificial binary is created by this discourse: the face-pic as a forward-thinking, modern symbol of contemporary gayness, while the penis is residual, tied to a place of abject sexual carnality detached from a broader legitimization of gay identity. Digital cruising, at least in its most dominant form, values transparency and clarity, while analog cruising takes pleasure in the opaque.

The homonormative discursive system Grindr is in and of carries its mask emblem only to disavow the pleasures suggested in donning a mask, with a strong narrative urging faith in the necessity of open, honest identification. But what about the pleasures of the opaque? Discretion, opacity, and obscurity are pleasure centers in a queer structure of feeling. In *Opacity and the Closet,* Nicholas de Villiers identifies opacity as a structuring aesthetic in queer cultural production, in his study of the works of Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Andy Warhol, and each queer writer's oblique references to their own sexualities. Describing a larger turn in queer cultural communication, de Villiers writes "Post-Stonewall gay politics has tended to prefer purity of communication whereby a fixed meaning is carried smoothly from sender to receiver, preferring the closure of denotation instead of the perpetual play of connotation" (21). Shaka McGlotten refers to this change in queer communication as "the identitarian demand, wherein

"loose affective, experiential…ties" were sacrified in favor of "stickier sorts of belonging, favoring identities and communities" (6). This is a style that is specifically *aged* in periods of queer history, equating the (pre-Stonewall) past with the suggestive, elusive, ephemeral, and coded, and the (homonormative) present with the direct, and "out and proud."

de Villiers is writing about creative works from a time period sufficiently in the past that they straddle such an artificial pre/post Stonewall binary, with less to say about the potential appropriation of queer opacity in the present day. Homophobia and real threats of violence continue to exist, as eternal justifications for the queer performance of discretion for the sake of safety. But equally exists the queer opaque as purely a performative, and a mode of pleasuring and erotic attachment. The pleasure of the opaque is implicit in de Villiers's work but never stated directly, perhaps in the author's own performance of a kind of queer discretion. But in the key examples unearthed by de Villiers, the erotic character of opacity becomes clear. It's in evidence in Roland Barthes's preface for a French homoerotic novel titled *Tricks* by Renaud Camus (writing the preface for a homoerotic novel despite not being publicly "out" its own kind of clear queer signifier). Barthes writes "Renaud Camus's *Tricks* are simple. This means that they speak homosexuality, but never speak about it: at no moment do they invoke it" (viii). Direct invocation of anything is here viewed as a form of concession to an overlaying power structure demanding clearly brandable identity, such as when Barthes suggests "to proclaim yourself something is always to speak at the behest of a vengeful Other, to enter into his discourse, to argue with him, to seek from him a scrap of identity: 'You are…' 'Yes, I am…'" (vii). Barthes refuses the "Yes I am" call-and-response here, the masculine gendering of powerful discourse a poignant sign of the enforcement of heteronormative masculinity. In praising the *Tricks,* Barthes builds up an almost impossible ideal of sex unencumbered by

language, desirously breaking apart structures of identity and sexuality, so intense that language itself can't hope to capture it.

Itself a novel of analog cruising, Barthes's enthusiasm for *Tricks* implies that cruising is at its most pleasurable when existing right at the cusp of being fully known. Discretion and privacy are concerns of safety, but equally they are in and of the "magic" of cruising in a queer nostalgic imagination. Many years after Barthes, trying to write his own paean to cruising, Alex Espinoza struggled with feelings of guilt over writing anything about cruising, worrying that "by opening up and laying bare the allure of such secret connections, am I participating in the eventual destabilization of a unique cultural practice in the gay community?" (32). The erotics of cruising seem to be at their most *stable* when given the distancing space of opacity. Jack Parlett noticed the same aesthetic penchant in photographers documenting notable queer cruising destinations, centering the "inscrutability to queer desire, often forced below– or behind– the surface of public visibility" (7).

In this way Barthes' piece anticipates work such as Leo Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave?," arriving six years later, trafficking in similar fantasies of fucking one's way out of the repressive foreclosures of semiotic possibility. Anal sex's potentially divine "self-shattering," capable of destroying normative masculinity's ethics and values, is part of a queer cultural imaginary seeking emancipation from the world through queer male sexuality (Bersani 217). José Esteban Muñoz famously unpacked the extent to which Bersani and the subsequent work in the "anti-relational thesis" section of queer theory, work praising the death of traditional psychoanalytic structure, has limited efficacy as a queer political worldview, the severing of relationality "a distancing of queerness from what some theorists seem to think of as the contamination of race, gender, or other particularities that taint the purity of sexuality as a

singular trope of difference" (11). Muñoz's corrective here is instructive in the example from Joel Simkhai's interview as well: the artificializing identity-play of masks may be a tempting draw, but the queerness of the act does nothing to alter the underlying political conditions of white supremacy that created the mask logo in the first place. Perhaps the fantasies of Barthes and Bersani can be felt as less a political paradigm, and more as an affective/erotic imaginary with its own aesthetic dimensions and influence. Analog cruising is part of this ongoing romance with a queer sexual aesthetic that plays with clear vs opaque, revelation vs discretion; open and shut closets, with hands *grazing* the hinges on the closet doors for their erotic potential. To echo back to the previous chapter, the erotics of opacity share a lot with the aesthetic approach of *grazing* I attributed to Todd Haynes' film *Carol,* a pleasure found in the gaps between complete and utter fulfillment and its absence. Squirt's play of opaque identities and *Carol*'s play of liminal textures are similar registers of affective binding taking place within the affective formation of LGBTQ nostalgia.

It must be noted that outside the use of *pleasure,* opacity is an ongoing necessity of safety for many queer people from intersectionally marginalized communities. J. Logan Smilges in *Queer Silence: On Disability and Rhetorical Absence* (2022) describes online queer opacity as "quieting," "a kind of partial self-silencing…that reveals some aspects of…queerness but withholds others" (70). Focusing on the experience of disabled queer people, Smilges writes:

> …queer speech marks progress and pride, whereas silence indicates madness or death. Within queer studies, this binary rubric serves as a structuring grammar for the field. It dictates that the queer subject, though not necessarily nondisabled, must nevertheless be spoken into existence in such a way that elides the dys-/disarticulate, the pathological, and thus the disabled conditions of queer's emergence (20).

Smilges emphasizes the liberating qualities of silence for disabled people's lives in a world that formulates "out and proud" discourse not just through the respectable conditions of what it means to be queer, but ableist notions of what it means to be a person. Smilges analyzes Grindr profiles and reads the work of absent pictures as radical, wherein "the absences become the punctum of the screen; they prick me, grab my attention…The embodyminded rhetorical energy of the user radiates through the digital material, manifesting as a visual absence" (93). Smilges' work reveals an additional political utility to queer opacity that is baked-in to the structures of preferred anonymity on a site like Squirt.

Similar to Smilges work, Jeffrey Q. McCune Jr. in *Sexual Discretion: Black Masculinity and the Politics of Passing* (2014) analyzes the tradition of "down low" (DL) sex between largely straight-identifying black men in the United States as a kind of sexual public that also roots itself in opacity for reasons of safety. Even more significantly to my own work and the project of this chapter, McCune Jr. details how opacity's necessity for safety doesn't counteract its dual role as an emphatically *chosen* erotic framework of identity, through which users derive pleasure. As McCune Jr. writes, for black men "the DL acts as an epistemology– a knowing and doing outside of the common eye, or more aptly the scenes of surveillance" that is based in the necessity of safety from violence both homophobic and racist, queers of color experiencing discrimination at far higher rates than their white counterparts (6). When being "out" in public remains a more dangerous proposition for people of color than it does for white people, "visibility" cannot be seen as a universal goal or endpoint of LGBTQ civil rights. McCune Jr. writes:

> While the growth of queer visibility for those who desire it is praiseworthy, it is as important to recognize the error in its establishment as the privileged or desired state.

> Such revelry over queer visibility often excludes those who operate outside the seemingly popular paradigm…as visibility is seen as the norm, invisibility and discretion are viewed as signs of abnormality or underdevelopment. Consequently, as queers of color embrace other ways of doing sexuality, they are marked as outsiders, while the dominant mode of doing is deemed as normative and most rewarding (171).

McCune Jr.'s passage describes the vital importance of honoring "other ways of doing sexuality" that route in and around the mainstream both for reasons of safety and because they bear cultural resonance.

McCune Jr. describes in *Sexual Discretion* how DL terminology and signifiers are used amongst Black men seeking sex with other Black men even when the preservation of discretion and anonymity seems to not be the priority. After finding with surprise a profile on the gay dating site Steve4Steve that stresses DL culture in its username but also includes a full face pic, McCune Jr. concludes "DL" here means something else than a concealed identity. It is a self-curation "evoked to…signify the presence of the masculine, indicate their navigation of sexuality outside specifically queer-oriented spaces, or as a description of how they move within the world in terms of privileging a private livelihood" (120). In this example, Black men reach out to the cultural index of "DL" and its associated aesthetic and performative features as a means of sexual subjectification. For the world of Squirt and the surviving embers online of analog cruising, an opaque past of queer public sex, outside of a specifically racialized context, a similar dynamic is at play: finding in opaque signifiers an erotic pleasure system.

Social media and online technologies, frequently dependent upon profile structures and a necessity of identifying yourself, present a clear threat to the previous status of unmoored location-based queer public sex. However, the aesthetic preference of analog cruising towards

opacity and oblivion, and discreet signification, have not been snuffed out of queer connective life with the domination of social media. Squirt instead offers a system of online connection that is more rooted in the ephemeral. Writing about the popularity of Snapchat, Benjamin Haber notes the emergence of a "digital ephemeral turn" whereby internet users are expressing more and more interest in "the pleasure of the fleeting encounter" against the rising standards of verified, official, and integrated digital life online (1070). Seeing ephemeral communication as a re-contextualization of risk and privacy breaches in online environments, Haber describes Snapchat's allure as part of a "more promiscuous orientation to media" in contrast to how "Apple's business model resonates with marriage as a temporal and cultural form" (1080).

Analog cruising is a desire based in *time* as much as it is a desire based in *visibility.* Media, when it bears the marks of significant age and therefore the residue of gendered and sexualized pasts, is the ideal trace of this desire, a desire where, in the words of David Church, "*pastness* itself can be eroticized" (2). Haber brings queer studies to the conversation of online privacy debates and notes the pleasures the ephemeral can bring ("ephemeral," with its associations of mystery and unknown origins, rings similar to "opaque"), but he doesn't acknowledge the ways in which love for the ephemeral possesses a distinct age and position of disjuncture in dominant LGBTQ progress history narratives. The standards of "out" identification and the erotic imaginaries they inadvertently inflame designate the past as a sexual playground. And the past can be murky, shrouded in mystery and dust, but the tantalizing play of grazing potential queer signification, donning and removing a mask, is itself a script of queer interaction, one validated and replicated across media forms. Squirt textualizes and operationalizes this kind of media public, where the queerly opaque is an erotic mode of nostalgia, preserving analog cruising and the structure of discreet identity that accompanies it.

3.5 Squirt's Analog Pleasures

Squirt is a password-protected site, accessible through free accounts. Once you log in at a computer, Squirt appears as a composite of squares on a screen, broad graphics to click on and slowly animated advertisements that move from one image to the next (Figure 3.4). The website's aesthetic is retro, evocative of simpler forms of web design in the 2000s. In 2012 a mobile version of the site was configured, to compete with Grindr and other queer male social networking apps, but Squirt's adherence to a principle of full nudity and sexual content (not privately locked pictures, as some of the other apps offer) still prevents it from circulating as a proper app in the Apple and Google app stores (Dagostino). The mobile site is a shorn version of its desktop companion, with the grid of user profiles visually similar to that of Grindr, but limited visibility of the rest of Squirt's cruising guide offerings, everything filed in one drop-down menu on the left side of the screen. In comparison to the streamlined functionality of Grindr, Squirt's clunky, even *muddy* aesthetic appearance feels evocative of a divergence in technological values Jean Burgess refers to as

Figure 3.4 – The Squirt Homepage (screenshot taken 9/8/21).

"hackability" against "usability." This dichotomy encapsulates a phenomenon in technological development throughout the 2000s wherein extensive customizability was seen as less commercially viable than an approach emphasizing ease to the user at all costs. Burgess pinpoints the launch of Apple's iPhone in 2007 as a key event in this transition, announcing a new era of "locked" devices with a more universalized function, but far easier for new users to adapt to, not unlike the arrival of apps in "simplifying" queer casual sex (30). Squirt often feels like a difficult website to navigate, with a certain sticky antiquity that is hard to name. I feel similarly "among the ruins" as cruisers braving the New York City waterfront. But as part of the site's qualities of pleasure and nostalgia, these difficulties end up part of the affective context of analog cruising's digital home.

Unusually for a queer social media app, Squirt is frequently defined by masses of written text, in standardized black 12-point font. Its decision to not adhere to the traditional gridded card design of many apps in the contemporary marketplace reinforces its out-of-time-ness. Many dating apps, including ones not specifically targeting LGBTQ communities such as Hinge, place more and more emphasis on pictures and visuality, with actual written self-summaries replaced by shorter question-and-answer prompts intended for casual flirtation. While Squirt's users are often brief in their writing as part of the general social mode of discretion, the antique structures of the web interface limit pictures and frequently point towards lengthy search forms of endless checkable boxes against a utilitarian grey background (Figure 3.5). The vibe would almost be bureaucratic

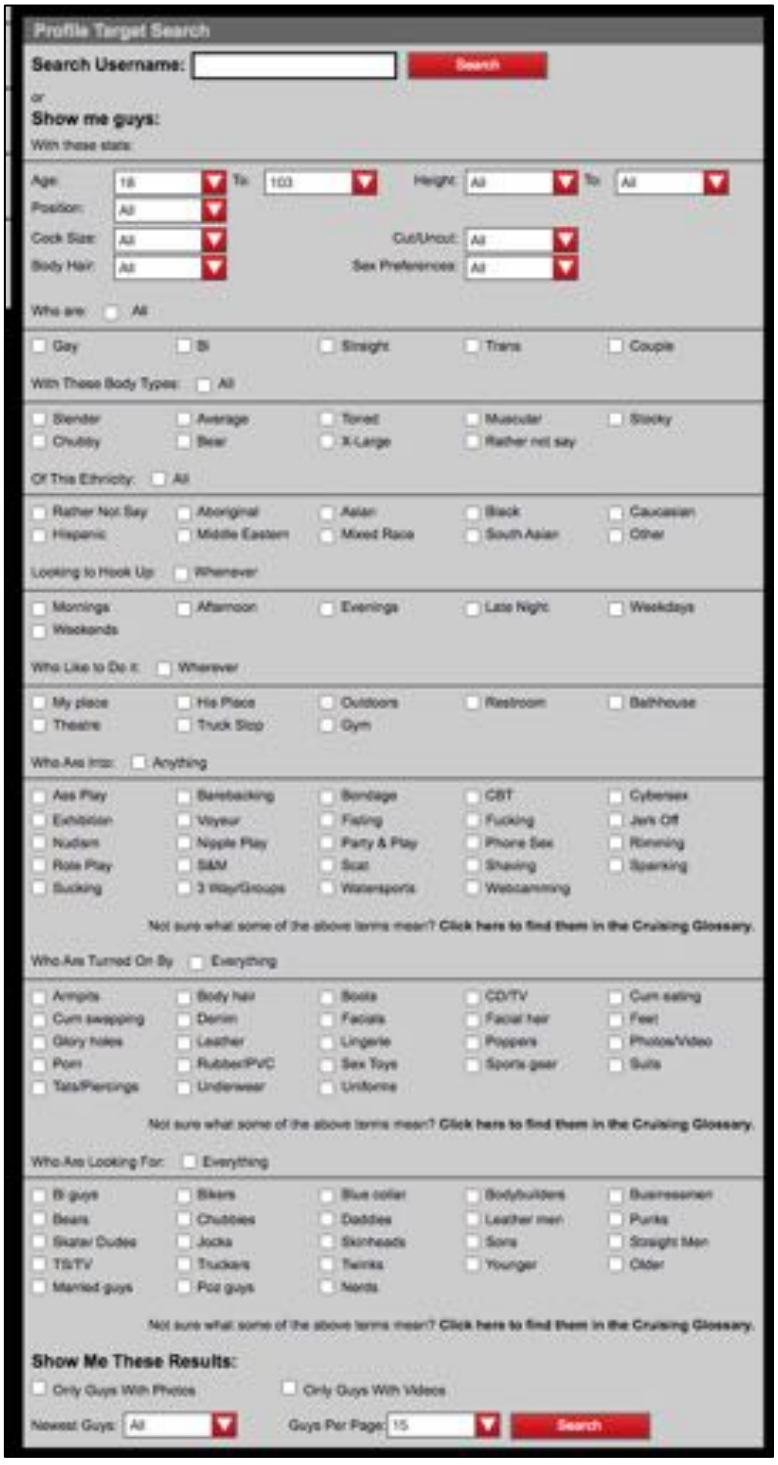

Figure 3.5 – Squirt user search form (screenshot taken 12/15/16).

were the content not so sexual! Feedback or questions to the website feel similarly formal: updates to cruising listings or general questions are handled via an email form to the web administrator, where a more streamlined means of user editing could be imagined. All this extensive text contributes to the website's desired affect of discretion and opacity, a sense of being buried in text.

Ben Light described Squirt as reminiscent of "networked publics and earlier discourses regarding the anonymous and pseudonymous Web" (244). This anonymity feels baked-in to the antiquity of its interface, and lack of focus on visual picture stimulation (ironic, for a site that notoriously permits full-frontal nudity within its user profiles). The focus on written text surfaces again in a section of the site called CockTales, evocative of fanfiction forums of the mid-2000s, where users post retellings of sexual exploits (some in multi-part serial posts) to comments and ratings from other users. In sharp contrast to the member videos section, which is mostly oral sex and masturbation videos shot in private, likely residential spaces, CockTales is ruled by the fantasy of analog cruising. Sex in gym locker rooms, movie theaters, even flea markets is reported heavily in the CockTales section of the site…but never shown visually, nor verified, as if with the 2010s web's signature blue check mark. The "reality" of the cruising events seems beside the point. Perhaps this kind of analog cruising best exists in the imaginations of writers and readers, for digital audiences.

One thing that is very noticeable about Squirt's interface is the site's preponderance of pop-up windows. Many functions– mail, videos, user profiles, chat forums– when clicked upon result in their own smaller pop-up window, widows that accumulate a user's screen and often linger, as ephemeral "evidence" of illicit online cruising when one appears to have exited the site completely. For me as a user the resulting affectivity of the site feels somewhat stiff, not a

smooth flow from page to page but a discordant stop-and-start of pop-up windows and out-of-date web design. This is mirrored in the motion advertisement banners on the top and sides of Squirt, promising exclusive deals on membership levels. There are no smoothly moving GIFs on Squirt, and no beautifully shot videos advertising their brand. There is instead a staggered clip of temptation and revelation, the site slowing down expectations of streamlined web efficiency and invoking an older code of erotic release, even if it's just the by-product of out-of-date web design. Hovering around known cruising areas and waiting for discreet sexual connection, "the watching" and "the waiting" is, according to queer writer Alex Espinoza, where he "learned about patience and perseverance" (11). Squirt requires this wait, and summons surprising categories of nostalgia in the process.

Figure 3.6 – Squirt's advertisements emphasizes play with anonymity and clarity, visualized as naked men against obscure backgrounds (screenshot taken 8/22/21).

It is in their advertising, slow-moving banner ads among it, that a lot of Squirt's aesthetic priority on opacity comes into focus. Squirt's advertisements use a variety of male-presenting models against monochromatic black or grey backgrounds, with slogans and catchphrases referencing the functions and allure of the site. Grindr has attempted advertising campaigns with men in real-life settings before, but unlike them, Squirt's men are in a completely artificial realm, posed erotically but frequently with emotionally unreadable faces. A banner ad for Squirt features a solitary man, completely naked but coyly covering his penis, against a generic grey background within Squirt's already black advertising (Figure 3.6). The text reads simply "Anonymous billing." as a caption under the photo, then "We've got you covered." a few lines down, with an old-fashioned "Learn More" button at the very bottom of the graphic. Detached from context of a legible reality, in an obscure void, Squirt assures anonymity in its sexual exploits, a touch of the opaque fantasy of analog cruising, trying its hardest to resist Barthes's "Yes, I am…" "Discreet" and "anonymous" are the most important words in Squirt's advertising lexicon, summoning alongside their promised cruising service a

suggestion of kinky danger, eroticizing the threat of being queer in a hostile world, foregrounding pleasure over fear.

Figure 3.7 – Squirt's "Ass-ets" animated advertisement has a vintage web sensibility (screenshot taken 8/22/21).

Many of Squirt's advertisements merge both energies into its brand of nostalgia: the sense of low-fi digital antiquity, and the vibe of pleasurable opacity. An advertisement emailed to my Squirt account inbox contained a gif animation image with slightly more movement than most Squirt advertisements. Focusing on a man's ass in a red and black jock strap (brand colors for Squirt), the body is cut off from any clearer articulation of identity: just an anonymous ass looking for companionship (Figure 3.7). The advertisement promises a special deal lasting for three days to save 40% off membership dues, "Save up to 40%* and Show Off Your Ass-ets," the line sure to emphasize the cheeky pun-work. The ass in question is vibrating, meant to evoke a haptic magnetism of flesh and fat, only the jiggling is not quite perfect. Much of the body's upper back jiggles as well in a seizing stutter, similar to the choppy gate of the rest of Squirt's advertised animations. There's an earnestness to the image– a kind of silly broadness amplified by a limited toolbox of digital animation directives that presents itself quite plainly: an attraction to the masculine corporeal form, albeit a cheesy, jokey one. Here Squirt's supposed disadvantages of time and style become pleasurable advantages, the out-dated embraced as a source of web 1.0 kitsch.

Figure 3.8 – The iconography of sailors is used throughout Squirt's advertising (screenshot taken 5/15/21).

As mentioned in the introduction, Squirt makes occasional use of the iconography of a sailor hat in its promotional materials. Sailors, as George Chauncey writes, "served for generations as the central masculine icon in gay pornography" due to their perceived character "as young and manly, unattached, and unconstrained by conventional morality" (78). As a prevailing erotic symbol of the queer twentieth century, it's only natural sailors should show up in Squirt's digital archive, winked at in the form of white sailor caps adorning some of the male models in another advertisement (Figure 3.8). This image sees a multi-racial collection of models lined up against Squirt's signature grey background. Again, the background seems to detach men from a socialized reality: in a grey void you can be anyone! The deliberately inclusive nature of the model casting also seems to speak to a hopeful promise of cross-racial coalition in queer spaces, hope that is frequently marred by in-community racism. Equally significant is Squirt's highlight of a *group* of men rather than one or two individuals. Emphasizing a larger community of men speaks to the ethics of maintaining a queer community, rather than following the function

of sex facilitated with online technologies to private monogamous ends. Dreaming of greater intersectional community support is not a condition tied exclusively to the past, it is an evergreen hope of bringing justice to unequal scales. But it can be a nostalgic desire– reflecting on the conditions and material-political allocations that led LGBTQ history to develop the way it did, and dreaming a way out of it. What if a movement activated in queer utopian thinking didn't sell out to a foreclosed dream of political possibility? The sailor hat is a time-traveling reference that opens a fundamentally nostalgic context of belonging.

Since I began tracking this website in 2016, very little has changed in Squirt's design, organization, or text, all while queer locative hookup apps like Grindr enter several design and re-design phases. This lack of change, itself a kind of revolution for tech culture's focus on constant revision, could be chalked up to an inattentive creative team, or one with limited ambition. But the continued presence of Squirt's users suggests this lack of change serves a clear purpose in the system of cruising online. As part of the generation of nostalgic affect, Squirt's form meets its function in a synchronized "out of time."

3.6 Conclusion: Sniffies and Further Remediations of Cruising

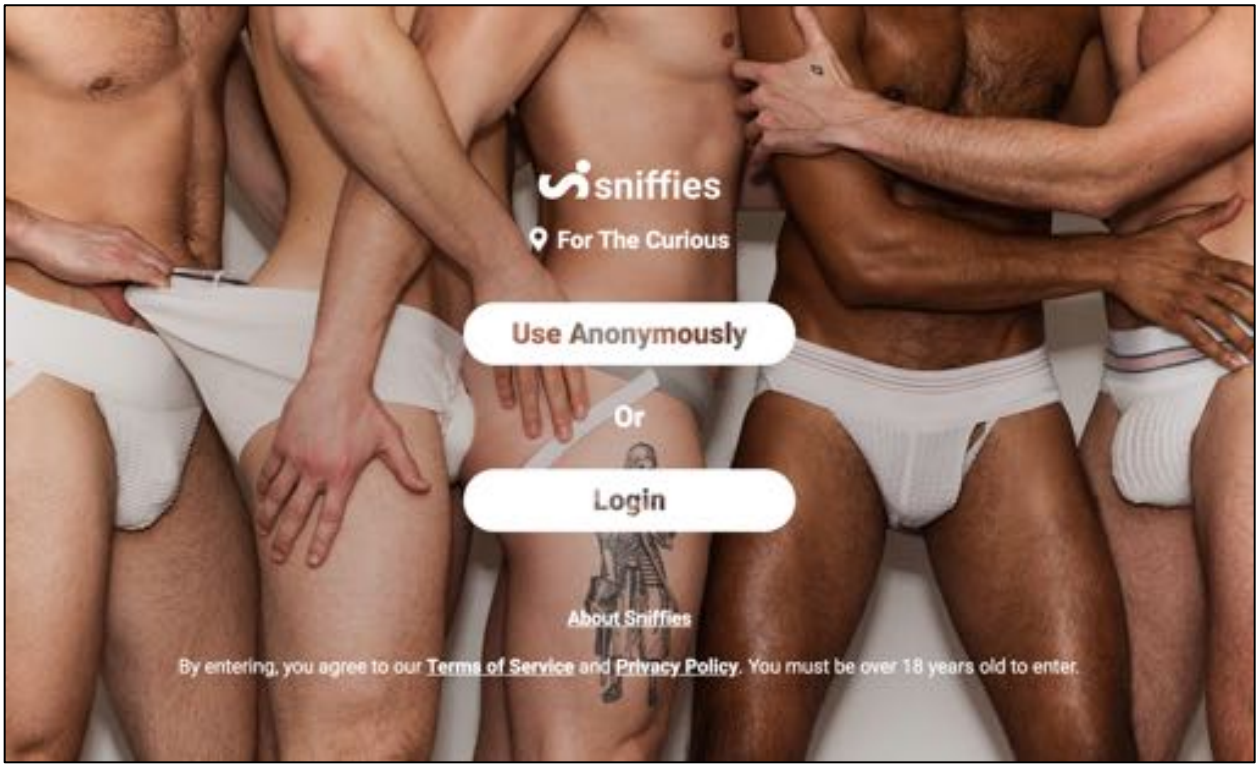

Figure 3.9 – Sniffies incorporates a lot of Squirt's visual strategies in a more polished style (screenshot taken 1/26/24).

Sniffies, an online social media venture aiming to make a dent in the web facilitation of cruising, came on the scene in 2018. With a coy tagline "For the curious" and a homoerotic advertising strategy, the site appeared attract much the same user hailed by Squirt (Figure 3.9). Sniffies shares with Squirt a geographic rootedness in real space, where users are encouraged to gather in cruising locations and send out their location to interested parties nearby. Also like Squirt, its sexual forthrightness prevents it from circulating in the mainstream app stores for smart phone download. As Eli Martin, Sniffies' marketing officer describes it, "We don't disguise ourselves as a dating app. It's very sex forward" (Murphy). In a discussion with *Slate* about the site, Martin repeats many nostalgic talking points that define the transformations queer public sex has undergone. At one point he complains "Grindr's really become like a Facebook," in terms of its sanitized connection to other social media apps. But perhaps taking a page from

Grindr and the newer generation of hookup apps, Sniffies contains no lengthy cruising site descriptions nor clunky antique design: it is maximized for sleek efficiency and seeks to be on-trend in design and tone. The interface is simply a GPS-determined map leading the user to either private residences or public spaces nearby. It's telling that every person that knew of my research and reported Sniffies to me did so after discovering it through advertising on TikTok, a youth-geared social media platform that has caught the viral on-trend cachet Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook once claimed authority over.

Although the site started in 2018, its TikTok advertising pushed it to new heights, causing one *Slate* reporter to identify it as of a piece with a particularly 2020s post-pandemic excitement for renewed in-person contact, or put more bluntly, "quarantine-induced thirst" (Murphy). Sniffies is a new remediation of queer cruising practice that, in the tradition of those that came before, seeks compromise between the ebb and flow of socio-technological change. Like the operations of Squirt through Pink Triangle Press, it possesses an odd connection to an underground queer internet of the past. The website's domain, with the name Sniffies, was purchased from an older gay networking site that facilitated the trading of used mens' underwear (Murphy). Another eroticizing of time and use, with a link to the sensory in its very name.

Over the past two chapters, I have attempted to illuminate the patterns and textualities that facilitate queer subject's affective binding with the past, the formal characteristics that promote pleasure in an affective formation of LGBTQ nostalgia and their socio-cultural stakes. LGBTQ prestige historical dramas depend on the activation of tactility through haptic visuality to "touch" the past, a touch that can be inviting and distancing in equal measure. Expanding across media platforms to the work of internet hookup cultures represents the activation of those pleasure structures in the real world. Where a visualized grazing touch creates a threshold of

erotic possibility, so too does the world of analog cruising's veiled play with opacity motivate a sexual encounter that is specifically *aged,* in and of community traditions and sensorially enveloping as a result. Nostalgic pleasure continues to be defined by its mix of positive and negative affects, from the barriers to direct enjoyment that come from the very mud of obsolescence and time.

Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore writes "Nostalgia for the pre-gentrified time or place or space might be one of the worst forms of gentrification" (148). While it's true that the threatened obsolescence of queer rituals of community is frequently a cause for cynicism and mourning, what remains significantly harder to threaten is the consistent motivating forces of desire and pleasure in LGBTQ affective formations. If nostalgia is a desire unfinished, it stages the rest of its desiring work in the space of media, and the publics that media create. The remembered archives of analog cruising are codes of queer sexual practice that were foundational in the history of community formation and the communication of shared group knowledge. Although the divide between analog cruising and its digital successors presents a threat of eviction from the cultural foreground, one likely to come to pass, the existence of media publics like Squirt represents a social desire for compromise between the residual and the emergent, and a queer strategy of archiving online. Nostalgia for the outlaw days of radical public sex is translated through media as a discreet internet forum that wears its age as an erotic quality. And this process of pleasuring with the past is a user relationship codifying the transitory tensions of LGBTQ media worlds.

Chapter 4 The Dog Days Are Over: Queer and Trans Nostalgias for the 1970s

4.1 Introduction: Between Logics of Marginality

The 1975 New Hollywood classic *Dog Day Afternoon* (dir. Sidney Lumet), starring Al Pacino, is the story of a bank heist gone wrong that uses its thriller genre to tap into a vein of anti-establishment political fervor. This kind of "political" cinema, bearing the traces of revolutionary sentiment but watered down to inoffensive standing, found new purchase as box office strategy through the 1970s, aiding a film industry venturing out of peril.[50] The film has many things people like about the 1970s and 1970s cinema: a sense of confrontational imitation-realism, great acting from a memorable generation of method actors, and the specific location of New York City, which frequently appears in many memorable films of the decade. Signified by a specific attachment-archive of inebriated sexuality, radical night life, and lux urbanity divided by grime and trash, New York City in the 1970s exists as an aggregate of cultural pleasures not unique to LGBTQ audiences, but rather circulating widely in American culture. Trash and grime are key to the overall vibe of *Dog Day Afternoon,* a film that takes place during a miserably hot day in the Summer that just won't end. Christopher R. Brown writes about the film, "Sweat encapsulates *Dog Day Afternoon*'s aesthetic. It is something over which we have no control; a waste product expelled for the health of the organism as a whole, connoting the entropic loss of energy" (51). The buckets of sweat Al Pacino as Sonny Wortzik, and the rest of the cast of the film, are drenched in over the course of its running time, much of it not very far from approximating "real time," is certainly testament to this aesthetic.

[50] Hollywood's attempts to benefit from leftist counter-culture and anti-establishment fervor in studio filmmaking is discussed by Robin Wood in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan…and Beyond* (1986) and Thomas Elsaesser in "The Pathos of Failure: American Film in the 1970s: Notes on the Unmotivated Hero" (1975).

This sweat applies to the political and cultural tensions the film faces as well. Sonny's robbery initiated with his friend Sal (John Cazale) becomes a public cause célèbre as a crowd gathers around the bank in voyeuristic fascination and something resembling anti-authoritarian solidarity. In a scene that frequently defines the film in the popular imagination, Sonny treats the immediate landing in front of the bank, surrounded by police officers and the backing crowd behind them, as a kind of stage, shouting "ATTICA! ATTICA!," referencing the specter of a real-life 1971 prison riot in demand of better living conditions that was a massive national news story. Sonny's crowd roars in support, against the police. Frederic Jameson, in his essay on the film, refers to the crowd as the "newly atomized petty bourgeoisie," who are caught up with Sonny and Sal in an outstretching "logic of marginality" that is suddenly capacious enough to hold all of the robbers, the hostage bank tellers, and the denizens of a brutally hot NYC day in one powerful coalition (50).

When this public is *queered* things get interesting. The film drops a big reveal halfway through: Sonny has been committing this bank robbery in the hopes of paying for his trans woman lover Leon (Chris Sarandon)'s gender affirming surgery. Typical for a film of its time period, *Dog Day Afternoon* is representationally insecure about how to parse the specific nuances of gender and sexuality in a cis man's relationship with a trans woman, so a vague indetermination lingers. This was somewhat mirrored by the critical reactions to the film, which responded to the vagueness by solidifying Sonny as a gay man, attracted to Leon for a gender he perceives as male (indeed, Sonny does refer to Leon as his "wife" but also states later of Leon "whom I love as no other man has loved another man in all eternity"). Robin Wood wrote in 1976 that *Dog Day Afternoon* was "the first American commercial movie in which the star/identification figure turns out to be gay," evidencing the discursive difference of mainstream

print culture in the 1970s and the relative invisibility of trans identities even to those writing in queer circles ("American Cinema in the '70s" 33). This news in the story of the film, and its re-contextualization of the entire robbery, has a notable effect on the crowd outside the bank. As Sonny frisks male police officers and a male doctor, checking for weapons as they enter the bank to assess the hostages, the crowd catcalls and hollers when Sonny's head is level with the men's crotches, suggesting oral sex: a newly homoerotic iconography in an interplay that was previously naturalized as comfortably heterosexual.

This is followed by a new arrival to the crowd of protesters. Sonny looks out from the bank door and sees a sign in the crowd repeating "WE SUPPORT SONNY," hearing a chant of "OUT OF THE CLOSETS AND INTO THE STREETS!" A group of gay liberation protesters has come to join the audience outside the bank in support of Sonny, shouting "SONNY ALL THE WAY!" The film's visual vocabulary makes a notable shift in this sequence: when before the crowd was always viewed as a mass entity, the cinematography focusing either on Sonny outside the bank or large-scale long shots of the crowd to emphasize its enormity, here the camera moves in for a closer look to the specific members. Now that there's a queer qualifier to the protests, a finer scalpel for detail emerges in the camerawork. The camera pans to the left in close-up across six faces: the first androgynous in a pink sweater, the second a mustached man, the third a man with shaggy hair in a white t-shirt, the fourth another androgynous person with long hair, the fifth a Black man with a beard in a green sweater, and the sixth a hairy man in denim (Figures 4.1–4.2). Night has fallen on the crowd and the jubilant anti-establishment mid-evening fervor of the earlier scenes has dissipated. For the first time "boos" are heard, the presence of the gay activists proving controversial and stoking a moment of division in the crowd.

Figure 4.1 – In *Dog Day Afternoon,* a panning shot showcases a diversity of protesters in support of Sonny, starting with an androgynous figure in a pink sweater...

Figure 4.2 – ...and moving to a Black man in a green sweater and a bearded white man in denim.

For a film that is not egregiously unfaithful to its real-life source material, this moment, a rare representation of gay activism in a mainstream mid-70s narrative film, stands out as uniquely incorrect. As depicted in the documentary *The Dog* (dirs. Allison Berg and Frank Keraudren, 2013), which will be explored at length later in this chapter, John Wojtowicz's robbery of a Chase Manhattan Bank in Brooklyn on August 22nd 1972, done at least partially to pay for a gender affirming surgery for his lover Liz Eden, was not celebrated nor endorsed by

prominent gay rights groups of the time.[51] In *The Dog,* gay activist Randy Wicker describes the reaction from other gay rights groups at the time as "one of horror," that the general "consensus" was "we don't want to be involved with him in any way because he's a mentally ill person…he's nuts." Rich Wandel, another activist from the era, appears to confirm that opinion, commenting that Wojtowicz "was not a Robin Hood to me…that's a very sick person." Both convey the image of Wojtowicz as a figure too extreme to reflect standard gay men of the time, too sexual and too mentally unstable to be associated with the gay rights cause.[52]

Arthur Bell, a founding member of the Gay Activist Alliance who reported on the bank robbery for *The Village Voice,* did so from the point of view of an activist familiar with Wojtowicz and Eden socially, who at the same time stresses the event's carnivalesque "bizarre" nature that was an extreme outlier from the center of gay life. Bell closes his article writing "members of the gay liberation movement, including yours truly, are having a helluva time figuring out how the whole Littlejohn [Wojtowicz] thing relates to gay liberation– and it does– and what we can do about it, if anything."[53] Where *Dog Day Afternoon* portrays a moment of queer solidarity against the police, the reality underneath its cinematic depiction reflects the influence of respectability politics on an emergent gay rights movement that resulted in isolation and a form of quiet evacuation from queer community, and the consolidation of a respectable

[51] I say "partially" because there is continuing dissent and insecurity over the actual motivations of Wojtowicz's bank robbery. Arthur Bell in his *Village Voice* report claimed Wojtowicz had connections to the Gambino organized crime family and was working under their direction, with any connection to Liz Eden "peripheral to the motive" overall. Bell connects the story to the mafia's ongoing influence in gay bars around New York City, which is a well-documented history. But Bell's claims about Wojtowicz specifically aren't clearly verifiable, and Wojtowicz claims there was no mafia involvement in his actions. Eden's total disconnection from the robbery and Wojtowicz's tendencies to fabricate his own history make the "truth" of the story difficult to discern.

[52] Though *Dog Day Afternoon* perpetuated a myth of broad gay support for Wojtowicz, the popular press occasionally exposed its inaccuracy. In an article on the aftermath of the film in *Playboy* in August 1976, Cliff Jahr listed the film's inclusion of gay liberation activists outside the bank as one of the primary factual inaccuracies of the film, writing "gays scoffed at John as any kind of hero" (130).

[53] "Littlejohn" was John Wojtowicz's nickname in the New York City's gay social networks. In *The Dog,* he claims it is a reference to his small penis size. After *Dog Day Afternoon,* Wojtowicz would embrace "the dog" as his new nickname, resulting in the title of the documentary.

center against a radical fringe. This dynamic was only intensified by the divides between gay men and trans women. As Aaron H. Devor and Nicholas Matte write, in the 1970s mainstream gay and lesbian activists viewed trans people as "embarrassments in the 'legitimate' fight for tolerance, acceptance, and equal rights," configured as "too great a challenge to mainstream society" (389).

Dog Day Afternoon as a cinematic mediation of these events had a net positive effect, albeit a complex one. Wojtowicz's sale of his own life rights to Warner Brothers Studios netted him a cash sum that he gifted to Eden from prison as a payment for her surgery: a straight public's voyeuristic curiosity about the queer weirdos of New York City transmuted into a check for the troubles endured as spectacle. But as a mediation created by primarily straight-identifying artists for a straight audience, its glossy distortion of the troubled queer politics undergirding its events reflects a block in remembrance that would be better worked through to process the histories of social organization that led us to the LGBTQ present.[54]

How we remember the 1970s, what attachment-archives we are directed to, and their socio-political consequence are the subjects of this chapter. The Wojtowicz bank robbery's positioning in the early 1970s is tremulously close to another event of major historic LGBTQ significance. The Stonewall Riots in 1969, at the Greenwich Village gay bar, roughly ten miles from the Chase Manhattan Bank in Brooklyn, was a series of protests by a diverse array of queer people initiated by police harassment. Stonewall is commonly used as a linchpin of LGBTQ rights history, seen as clarifying and emboldening an era of activism secured by the following decades.

[54] *Dog Day Afternoon*'s limited efficacy as a queer political text, understandable for its time and material positioning, is even more clear when one remembers director Sidney Lumet once summarized the message of the film in a glib, cringe-inducing stab at sympathetic charity: "freaks are not the freaks we think they are" (Brown 36).

In *Queer Fictions of the Past: History, Culture, and Difference* (1997), Scott Bravmann interrogates the iconicity of Stonewall and, similar to this disjunction between *Dog Day Afternoon* and its real events, finds a history where the promise of broad queer coalition is enshrined in cultural memory, even in the face of a more divided reality. Reading iconography such as photographs of the riots by Fred McDarrah, Bravmann notes the focus of visual culture to stress the diversity of the riots' participants– not unlike the panning shot in *Dog Day Afternoon* that conjures a veritable "Village People" of different queer demographics supporting Sonny Wortzik– relating specifically to contexts of racial difference. Bravmann reads the iconography as eliding the structuring power dynamics of race:

> By (falsely) grounding the ostensible origins of contemporary queer politics in an already present resolution of racial differences, tensions, and segregation, the previous and subsequent white-dominated political organizations can be regarded– even criticized– as unauthentic, as merely historical aberrations for their failure to reconcile queer differences (80).

For Bravmann, the utilization of Stonewall as a broad iconography of queer coalition– including the contested incorporation of cis lesbian women in its history– "articulates an explicitly figurative understanding of the riot as a symbol that draws on then-current emergent political practices" (82). Here Bravmann indicates one structuring philosophy of positivity– similar to those decried by Heather Love in *Feeling Backward*– shielding our awareness to a more objective knowledge of gay rights organization in the 1960s and '70s.

While Bravmann capably diagnoses a mainstream utilization of Stonewall iconography that is misleading, he simultaneously underserves the queer people of color like Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, and others who were at Stonewall and played a foundational role in its

historical significance. Alongside Bravmann's valid claims of queer people of color being used as an insincere iconography of racial harmony in Stonewall visual cultures is the equally present history of white-washing and trans erasure in how Stonewall is alternately remembered. Cáel M. Keegan tackles precisely this issue in an essay on Roland Emmerich's 2015 prestige historical drama *Stonewall,* which implants a white gay protagonist onto the event, obscuring legacies of Black Power and trans activism, and goes as far as to have him throw the brick that initiates the riot. Keegan discusses the film as "the most obvious example of an emergent pattern in mainstream representations of LGBTQ history: disruptive innovation in the portrayal of past LGBTQ lives and the resulting aesthetic gentrification of queer and trans cinematic worlds" (50).

These different narratives, blocking and occluding in different ways, demonstrate the idea systems influencing a historical imaginary of the 1970s in LGBTQ culture. They result in images of LGBTQ collectivity that suppress tensions and fissures in group belonging. Historical imaginaries have clear and substantial ties to the nostalgic imaginaries this dissertation explores, which apply a sentimental and emotional layer to what is essentially an ordering of historical fact. Media popularize historical narratives and communicate affectively, appealing to conduits of feeling in order to propagate their influence. In this chapter I'm interested in exploring the potential of coalitional nostalgias that can render a vision of LGBTQ life in the 70s as a grounds for nostalgic pleasure without becoming subverted by narratives that distort, subjugate, and align with dominant power structures.

In "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," Cathy J. Cohen calls memorably for a re-thinking of queer politics understood through principles of intersectionality. Cohen writes:

> the radical potential of queer politics…rests on its ability to advance strategically oriented political identities arising from a more nuanced understanding of power. One of the most difficult tasks in such an endeavor (and there are many) is not to forsake the complexities of both how power is structured and how we might think about the coalitions we create (458).

She continues to note that "the multiplicity and interconnectedness of our identities" are themselves "the most promising avenue" to enact this kind of queer public (460). This is similar to José Esteban Muñoz's framing of queerness in *Cruising Utopia,* wherein "we are not quite queer yet," community definition held in an "ontologically humble state" that is open to revision and expansion (22). Both writers envision queer imaginaries that are intersectional and wide-ranging, expanding Jameson's described "logic of marginality" by a significant elaboration. Oddly enough, their kind of hoped collectivity, reaching out to embrace the other, is reflected in *Dog Day Afternoon,* albeit in an insincere portrayal manufactured for straight audiences that hollows out conflict and nuance. Is there a middle path available, between deceptive simplicity and separated conflict? Can queer intersectionality be a political directive fueling nostalgic imaginaries? Or does the sentimentality of nostalgia, which can curdle into a sense of ownership and possession of the past, reroute to the blockages and misreadings of individual cultures? Are there queerly coalitional nostalgias?

Cohen's essay criticized queer politics for its "inability to incorporate into analysis of the world and strategies for political mobilization the roles that race, class, and gender play in defining people's differing relations to dominant and normalizing power" (457). My focus here interprets intersectionality on what could be considered a smaller scale, but is in fact just as fraught with division and tension. Looking at the acronymic nature of "LGBTQ," a conjoined

label institutionalized throughout American society (including as an organizational tab for streaming content on Netflix), I open an intersectional reading of LGBTQ media representation to better understand the unequal distribution of power across this coalition. The label "LGBTQ" hides tensions between cis queer people and trans people that surface in the textuality of media. Specific community nostalgias– amongst gay men exclusively, amongst trans women exclusively– are inevitable and essential, but Stonewall's role in the cultural memory– as the coalitional resistance of many queer people combined– speaks to the historical reality of this wide, intersectional ideal and why affective formations attending to LGBTQ history do insist upon an overarching "our culture." Apart from logic entirely, there is emotional significance in the queer community ideal.

This chapter focuses on documentary, away from aesthetic re-creations and the transformations of narrative media, to consider how the bare materials of history are developed into socio-political narratives of nostalgia. In documentary, a genre allegedly tied to the dissection of reality, the mechanics of historical narrative myth-making become uniquely clear. As Trinh T. Minh-ha writes, documentary is:

> the elaboration of a whole aesthetic of objectivity and the development of comprehensive technologies of truth capable of promoting what is right and what is wrong in the world, and by extension, what is "honest" and what is "manipulative" (94)

The extensive tools of message-making naturalized as real within documentary lead Minh-ha to conclude "There is no such thing as documentary," the vaulted category of reality filmmaking nothing but a social fabrication (90). For this reason, studying documentaries for affect taps into the flows of emotion and sentiment that define larger contexts of historical feeling. I explore nostalgia for the 1970s as an attachment archive particularly for queer male populations, and

resulting tensions around trans life and history that are exposed in the place of media. *Historical* documentaries in particular house the notable contestation of a cherished nostalgic aggregate– the queer 1970s. After an overview of the discourse at large, I turn to *The Dog,* the documentary on John Wojtowicz and the events behind *Dog Day Afternoon,* to analyze how these tensions fail to be reconciled and leave behind a text with erratic mixed messaging, exposing the divides and historic pains between cis queer men and trans women. I close with an example of experimental film art, trans filmmaker Malic Amalya's *FlyHole* (2017), to consider the potential of intersectional, coalitional nostalgias for the queer 1970s. These are nostalgic media publics, created with the interplay of affects of tension and disarray, and represent the challenges facing LGBTQ media.

4.2 Transphobia in Gay Nostalgic Narratives

Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed, partners and scholars who frequently write together, emphasize a perspective of gay nostalgia for the 1970s in their book *If Memory Serves: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Promise of the Queer Past* (2011).[55] Celebrating with sentiment some of the same areas and cultures of gay history mentioned in chapter three (ex. the New York City piers), the authors compellingly narrate the cultural processes that followed the AIDS crisis in eradicating pleasurable memories of gay worlds. The gay male cultures of the 1970s were cast by homonormative authorities as "a 'diseased' past of narcissistic and recklessly immature pleasures that supposedly led to AIDS." They continue:

[55] Jeffrey Escoffier offers a thorough history of gay nostalgia for the 1970s in his article "Sex in the Seventies: Gay Porn Cinema as an Archive for the History of American Sexuality" (2017). Beyond Castiglia and Reed, Escoffier tracks gay 1970s nostalgia to sociology research in the 1990s, the work of Michael Warner, and conversations around the art of Robert Mapplethorpe, amongst other sources. I retain a focus on Castiglia and Reed's text in this chapter for its influence as well as its contextual friction with trans studies.

> The sexual past was relentlessly reconfigured as a site of infectious irresponsibility rather than valued for generating and maintaining the systems of cultural communication and care that proved the best– often the only– response to disease, backlash, and death (3).

The authors illuminate the ways in which the 1970s was created, in the minds of respectability politics-minded gays, as the sinful lack of structure that required significant over-correction in the form of 90s homonormative politics. The writers don't claim that gay pragmatists necessarily considered 70s excesses the *cause* of the AIDS crisis, but rather that the mass community grief and terror resulted in blame placed upon gay sexual freedom of the 1970s as a kind of shocked trauma response.

Having summoned this degree of abjection for the sexual cultures of the 1970s, Castiglia and Reed fondly cherish the era in an act of sentimental reclamation, configuring the '70s as an attachment-archive representing freedom and an ideal of gay male community. The book utilizes a series of statements from gay men explaining their feelings and orientations towards gay cultural memory and the transformations of activist culture. One speaker, who claims to have a case of "seventies envy," essentially reflects the perspective of the writers when he speaks eloquently of the affective currents of nostalgia and community belonging that augment the discursive positioning of the '70s in gay male culture:

> …when someone stuck poppers under my nose for the first time, I felt like I was actually transported back to the Seventies. I felt like I was feeling what 'they' must have felt, our older (or dead) gay brothers (dare I use that term)…I felt like I had tapped into some eternal, carnal, homoerotic AND brotherly stream of consciousness. Essentialist and sentimental, yes. But I experienced a much greater sense of community than, for instance, I ever did in cliquey and self-righteous ACT UP and Queer Nation social circles (41).

The speaker emphasizes properties of cultural binding that are activated by a sexual ritual. He feels connected to a larger aggregate of gay male memory and feeling through poppers as a time travel device. Examples like this lead Castiglia and Reed to cohere a theory of "memory…[as] an act of resistance," insisting on the productive work of gay cultural memory to build worlds and collect histories (11). In this way, the goals of Castiglia and Reed's book are much akin to my own in this dissertation (in a case of parallel thought, we both drew on references to Lot's wife to talk about queer history. Perhaps it's time to hang that jersey from the rafters). They deploy "amnesia" throughout their book as a catch-all reference to forms of homonormative authority that are attempting to disentangle gay community present from its past. As a queer man equally prone to the desiring pull of the past, and a believer in its necessity as a cultural tool in the present, I share a lot of their instincts against homonormative amnesia.

Christopher Reed found notoriety in 2018 for reasons quite divorced from the queer intellectual and academic missions I aim to continue. In August 2018, Reed posted a "statement of principles" on his faculty page at Pennsylvania State University. The statement takes the form of a list of 25 "axioms and observations," in tribute to the structure of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "Axiomatic" and Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp."[56] In the list Reed decries the new sensitives around trans gender identification he sees in his students, specifically denouncing pronoun disclosure policies in university classrooms and the controversy around deadnaming, the act of referring to a trans person by the name they used prior to transitioning against their preferred name. The statement, true to its origins in Sedgwick and Sontag, draws on queer theory traditions of interpretation and language deconstruction in its analysis of trans identities. Over the following months, the statement slowly circulated through various social media channels and

[56] Reed deleted his statement of principles following the controversy, but it remains accessible online via the internet archiving tool the Wayback Machine.

became a subject of debate for people in academia, particularly scholars and teachers doing work related to gender and sexuality, like Reed.

Conversation reached a height when *the Los Angeles Review of Books* published a response from Grace Lavery, an English scholar teaching at UC Berkeley and trans woman. Lavery, calling the statement a "paranoid, joyless manifesto," focuses on the pedagogical implications of Reed's writing, addressing his "principles" as examples of harassment against trans students. She draws out the logical conclusions of Reed's statement in writing:

> to be a well-educated queer would have to mean, perforce, that one is an ex-trans person…We…appear to him as arrested subjects with infantile attachments to sexed and gendered particularities, to whom our brave teachers are compelled to administer an abrasive but medicinal draft.

Lavery suggests the canon of queer theory, as deployed by Reed, amounts to a tool designed to invalidate claims of trans identity as the delusions of a naive essentialism. For this reason, in the title of her piece she suggests graduate school, and its accordant value system, could amount to a kind of conversion therapy.

Reed responded to this response with another piece in *the Los Angeles Review of Books*, this time with his partner Christopher Castiglia in tow, opening snidely "we take pleasure in the idea that any future references to this text will likely deploy the suddenly chic pronouns they/theirs, not because we demand it, but in the old-fashioned way…the English language works." Castiglia and Reed use their space to argue "claims made in the name of trans-identity are pitched to supplant and even censor gay, lesbian, and queer forms of activism and culture." In a lengthy piece of many digressions, I would argue Castiglia and Reed refuse to deal with much of the substance of Lavery's response, dodging concerns over classroom safety to double-

down on philosophical debates of gender and identity. Lavery declined to write an additional essay, instead posting a short thread on Twitter, writing the entire affair illuminated "the ignorance and hostility that trans scholars face." She also reiterated her gratitude "for the support and solidarity of cis queers throughout the academy, of every rank and 'generation.'" She ended the tweet with a reference to intersectional coalitions across identity lines: "Trans people and other queers have long held each other up, and we won't be divided now" (@graceelavery).

Lavery's statement of gratitude cuts against Castiglia and Reed's accusations of ingratitude, writing "If you want respect, you should extend it by acknowledging your legacy from the feminist, gay, and lesbian activists who allowed you the institutional and intellectual authority you now enjoy, and take care to use that authority wisely." Publicly this story played out as a war of generations in queer academic space, which does the work of connecting what could seem like "just a social media fight" to the concerns of Castiglia and Reed's scholarship. I bring up this whole affair not to dramatically inflate conversations between academics or relish in inter-generational scholar drama, but rather to consider the interesting reflections it summons related to the belief systems undergirding queer theories of history, and their inevitable ties to nostalgia.

Castiglia and Reed's book is a good example of how academic work, alongside media, is one of the propagators of LGBTQ nostalgias, their own work heralding the 1970s. And although Reed's statement of principles didn't advertise itself as being about nostalgia at first, it truly is. In the near-decade since the publication of their book, the trans rights movement appears to have become, in their eyes, one of the forces instituting a cultural amnesia about the queer past. The grounds for this transphobic laying down of boundaries, for whom queer history is a desirous repository and for whom it is not, are laid in *If Memory Serves.* Critiquing José Esteban Muñoz,

the authors strike against queer historiographic approaches that allegedly involve "rhetorical disavowals of the recent past," erasing the lived experience of the past in favor of "current manifestations of queerness in the New York and Los Angeles avant-gardes" that view the past as significant "*only* when translated into present terms, that the *pastness* of memory does no important work of its own" (6).

This, in my view, misreading of Muñoz– *Cruising Utopia* is about nothing if not the generative work of the past as a distinct collection of epistemologies and discourses to the present. Castiglia and Reed's defensiveness against queer historiographic approaches that scramble established identity categories avoids what Elizabeth Freeman calls "the genuine *past*-ness of the past– its opacity and illegibility, its stonewalling in the face of our most cherished theoretical paradigms" (63). In their scholarly work, Castiglia and Reed articulate a nostalgic platform that anxiously draws a narrow circle around the kinds of queer identities that can bind to larger affective flows of "properly queer" nostalgia. Neatly demonstrating what Svetlana Boym would call a "restorative nostalgia," they narrativize "memories [that] insist that once was might be again" in spite of the opponents to such memories (14).

Overall, the public contention between Grace Lavery and Castiglia and Reed demonstrates the ongoing divisions in the halls of queer theory around competing trans theory conceptualizations of scholarly thought, and the resulting tensions for gender and sexual epistemologies writ large.[57] But it also reflects the unique role of feeling in the articulation and mobilization of theories of history across diverse publics. Lavery's diagnosis of Reed's statement as "paranoid" meets a cultural moment where trans discrimination from within gay and lesbian

[57] Cáel M. Keegan discusses these tensions in a 2018 article "Getting Disciplined: What's Trans* About Queer Studies Now?" in the *Journal of Homosexuality,* a journal title itself reflecting the contentious politics of coalition under which LGBTQ studies resides. The article title is a reference to a 2005 article in *Social Text,* "What's Queer About Queer Studies Now?" by David Eng, Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz that similarly sought to assess the state of the field and its underlying values.

worlds in particular has escalated dramatically. In a 2021 editorial for *The Washington Post,* Lynne Stahl, a lesbian woman and librarian, recounts the rising wave of anti-trans bills in American state legislatures and compares this to voices in her own personal networks claiming lesbians are facing "extinction" as more and more young people identify as trans. Noting the role of "extinction anxieties" in numerous nationalist and white supremacist movements, Stahl writes "Lesbians are not a species, and we feed existing racist, ableist, and homophobic agendas when we invoke extinction."

The anxiety of extinction points to the emotional motivations around transphobia from gay men and lesbians: it is a coercion of desperation and fear. Considering the power of emotion to build worlds, craft narratives, and generally "do things" in Sara Ahmed's words, these affects of fear and anxiety are affective formations operating alongside, and sometimes in concert with, nostalgia as cultural motivators for queer people. These affects reach out to attachment-archives of historical data– such as the iconography and milieu of the queer 1970s– to make manifest larger social and political dynamics.

1970s iconographies, far from being just the domain of cis gay men, have currency and appeal in trans worlds as well. Abram J. Lewis writes about trans activism in the 1970s. Even as he notes that the decade, similar to the 2010s, is rife with the evacuation of trans people from mainstream gay, lesbian, and feminist political organizing, he retains a glimmer of nostalgic sentiment for the time period (60). Discussing Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson's STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries), the activist financing of millionaire trans philanthropist Reed Erickson, and other notable trans political developments of the decade, Lewis writes:

> trans activist cultures of the 1970s have at least as much to offer us in their striking discontinuities with trans activism in the present. It is, in fact, in their divergences from contemporary orthodoxies of political organizing that 1970s trans cultures proffer an especially powerful model of gender justice developed outside of liberal and state-sanctioned logics of representation, recognition, and civil rights (59).

Lewis notes that this history occurs in a time well-before "transgender" would even "emerge as an umbrella term for non-normative gender forms," but is nonetheless a "history of trans hyper-visibility and resistance" (60). Lovingly recounting trans activist fascinations with the animal kingdom, hallucinogenic drugs, paganism, and extra-terrestrial life– testament to the lively imaginations and passions circulating in leftist culture in the '70s– Lewis admits "these activists' most imaginative experiments in social change work look very little like viable or 'serious' activism at all, especially from the vantage point of today's logics of nonprofit reform" (64).[58] In that eccentricity Lewis finds a wealth of memory that can do passionate work in the present, similar to Castiglia and Reed's framing of the open eroticism of '70s gay worlds.

The '70s is an iconography shared across the umbrella of LGBTQ culture. What is then interesting to document, is how established nostalgia media forms contextualize this attachment-archive differently, tipping the vitalities of its mediation in different ways across the LGBTQ coalition. The following section explores the form of major LGBTQ historical documentaries about the 1970s for a suggestion of the belief systems that undergird their textual representations.

[58] Just some of the fascinating excursions into the animal, hallucinogenic, pagan, and alien in '70s trans activism: annelid worms and jewfish were embraced as icons for their unique, flexible gender biologies; activist artwork frequently associated trans women with butterflies and sea horses; Reed Erickson, who owned a pet leopard, invested heavily in "interspecies animal communication" research, "particularly with dolphins and whales"; hallucinogenic mushrooms and other drugs were touted as excellent tools of coping with life in trans newsletters (64); the *Radical Queen* newsletter had a regular section on paganism, magic, and witchcraft to serve trans ends; and Transexual Action Organization founder Angela Douglas was fascinated with extraterrestrials and claimed to have met several over the course of her life (65).

4.3 The 1970s in LGBTQ Documentary

1970s has a significant hold as both a frequent subject and origination point for LGBTQ documentary. *Word is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (1977, directed by the Mariposa Film Group but frequently credited to Peter Adair) looms large in LGBTQ media histories as a ground-breaking representation of gay and lesbian life. The film arguably was one of the forerunners of a genre with a substantial history and notable role in the communication and representation of queer worlds and livable queer lives. Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs describe the cultural work of LGBTQ documentaries as "speaking to and about worlds that exist 'outside' and 'inside' of ourselves, assuming the efficacy of social actors and groups, and, crucially, providing a source of counterinformation to hegemonic news media." LGBTQ documentaries enter a semiotic fray where "reality, truth, and valued representations are always a priori, and usually implicitly, heterosexual," their expressions thus the careful negotiation of a "representational regime" where showing something queer is a political act in and of itself (4). But in navigating the "representational regime" that LGBTQ documentaries themselves set up, I am curious about the tropes and narratives compiled within queer imaginaries for the 1970s– like the nostalgic hedonism explored in the previous section– and how they are translated into the aesthetics of documentary cinema. In so doing, I analyze two films from two distinct cultural moments in the 21st century– *Gay Sex in the 70s* (dir. Joseph Lovett, 2005) and *Studio 54* (dir. Matt Tyrnauer, 2018)– for a sense of the textual qualities of each film's nostalgia, and how they relate to projected publics of queer collectivity.

Gay Sex in the 70s doesn't aspire to a kind of queer collectivity, and it doesn't need to. Rooted in a specific celebration of queer male heritage, the film casts as its subject the utopian hedonism of '70s queer male worlds, acting as a faithful document of a kind of history that is

often ephemeral and hard to access. *Gay Sex in the 70s* is essentially a history of nightlife and sexual practice, surveying New York City in the 1970s for the opportunities and subculture it offered to queer men. Early on the filmmaker asks photographer Alvin Baltrop whether or not he would consider NYC in the 70s "the most libertine period the Western World has seen since Ancient Rome."[59] Baltrop simply chuckles, and nods approvingly. The film is littered with anecdotes and micro-historical gems that cast their own affective glow over the proceedings. Susan Tomkin, a former assistant for Bruce Mailman, the gay businessman who operated bathhouses in New York City at the time, claimed that the historic St. Marks Baths, which were open 24 hours a day and seven days a week, didn't have locks on even their outer doors. Such a spirit of freedom, casual sex, and easy trust permeated the time and place that the building held no locking capabilities. The city had to padlock it shut when it was finally shut down. The film's many narrators speak lovingly of the sexual affordances of the city and its gay male world, in conversation stretching from the whisper network of gay doctors, who provided more strategic and understanding advice on sexually transmitted infections than their straight counterparts, and the summer fantasies of nearby Fire Island. An interviewee quotes from a description of Fire Island offered by Larry Kramer in the novel *Faggots*: "All this beauty, such narcotic beauty…yes, it's hard to leave." The sentiment capably reflects the film's overall tone of nostalgic attachment. It's hard not to feel like something has been irrevocably lost when one of the film's narrators, artist Barton Benes, walks around the newly gentrified waterfront piers at the film's conclusion, to the tune of dreary mid-2000s dance techno in place of the film's otherwise Disco and era-appropriate soundtrack.

[59] In his analysis of the film, Gilad Padva notes the comparison to Ancient Rome and utilizes it to initiate a chapter-long comparison between the gay 1970s and the myth of Dionysus. Both the filmmaker's citation of Rome and Padva's elaboration into classical mythology emphasize the pull of ancient civilizations as an attachment-archive furthering gay nostalgia in the twenty-first century.

Gilad Padva in *Queer Nostalgia in Cinema and Pop Culture* includes a chapter on *Gay Sex in the 70s,* where he criticizes the film as a conservative, sex-negative take on the decade as the origins of the AIDS crisis, using the aforementioned writing from Christopher Castiglia and Christoper Reed. Padva writes:

> *Gay Sex in the 70s,* in its seemingly liberal, nostalgic perspective, oscillates between a spectacular portrayal of Dionysian gay community as a promiscuous collective celebrating its sexual energy in an unbound, mad, callous, destructive and wasteful manner, *and* the neo-conservative, Apollonian preaching that warns its viewers about the dangers of promiscuous, uncontrolled sexual practice…it associates the "sin" and its "punishment" (70).

I think Padva's read of the film enforces a lecturing counter to 70s gay nostalgia that the film actually takes deliberate steps to avoid. *Gay Sex in the 70s* only shifts to the AIDS crisis in its final ten minutes, as an expression of mourning for the worlds of open gay male sexuality that were forever marked by immense tragedy and newfound affects of fear and paranoia. Many of the film's narrators are HIV-positive and briefly discuss their social and sexual lives post-diagnosis, in a welcome show of integrating HIV status with unabashed sexuality rather than merely reducing them to separate sin/punishment. Rodger McFarlane, a writer/activist and one of the film's main narrators, even echoes Castiglia and Reed's thesis– six years ahead of the book– when he says "It [70s gay sexual cultures] may have seemed trivial, but it's where we learned to love each other and it's what made possible our heroic reaction when the war came." Padva seems to suggest that the film's mention of AIDS at all is grounds for its dismissal as sex-negative fear-mongering, when, as I have mentioned throughout this dissertation, nostalgia is

comprised of both positive and negative affects, the light and the dark.[60] A sentimental attachment of nostalgia is only so when it registers on some level a profound undertow of loss. 70s gay nostalgia is an affective formation formed through the AIDS crisis as a coping strategy and honorable commemoration.

Gay Sex in the 70s toured the LGBTQ film festival circuit and had a modest theatrical run before securing a DVD release through Wolfe Video. Wolfe Video is one of a slew of independent companies described by Hollis Griffin as distributing middlebrow, non-confrontational LGBTQ cinema primarily imagined for home viewing as opposed to theatrical exhibition. These films, in the words of their distribution companies' employees, serve a "politicized– yet not 'too' politicized– target audience" (60). This spirit well-describes the aesthetics of *Gay Sex in the 70s,* which employ traditional historical documentary styles of stock footage montage and talking head interviews. Early in the film, a montage of scandalous, sexually provocative photography of the time period is set to "Do You Wanna Funk" by Sylvester and Patrick Cowley. The montage's compilation via visibly mid-2000s digital editing software techniques of pushy zooms and distracted pans make the film a nostalgic activation two times over– one, the intended, its celebration of 70s gay eroticism, and two, a newly acquired layer from viewing once-cutting-edge familiar editing mechanics in the 2020s.

This aesthetic muscle of the film– punching in on details of larger photos or films, prompting a viewer instinct of looking closer– highlights the film's clear focus on the iconicity of masculine bodies in its evocation of gay cultural memory. It also implies a libidinal drive that makes good on the film's title. Torsos, pectoral muscles, nipples, buttocks, crotches, thighs and

[60] Although I think Padva's reading of the film is dismissive, mainstream critics during the time of its release did ascribe to the film the more sex-negative, lecturing tone that Padva describes. Owen Gleiberman closed his review in *Entertainment Weekly* writing "The director, Joseph Lovett, wants us to ask if there's such a thing as too much freedom, and he has the sobriety to say yes – and no." (accessed via an excerpt on the film's website, gaysexinthe70s.com/reviews/)

of course penises– *Gay Sex in the 70s* lustfully takes apart male bodies and enshrines them as communal iconographies of sexual citizenship. The film, in essence, depicts the casting off of sexual shame of the decade as a process of embodied transformation. Arnie Kantrowitz, a literature professor and one of the film's narrators, provided photographs of himself to filmmakers that are assembled in a dissolving graphic match. These photos, as Kantrowitz narrates, showcase how he "came out of the closet and into the movement," dissolving from a studious-looking man in glasses wearing a checkered blazer and a shirt and tie into someone more visibly in and of the counter-culture: hairy-chested and shirtless except for a vest with the word "GAY" on the lapel, circular black sunglasses, and a pronounced handlebar mustache. Images of masculine bodies are used as vessels for historical transformation, whether in distant composition like Kantrowitz's metamorphosis or close-up fetishization of sexual and sexualized body parts.

If these embodied erotic details are the spice of a risqué film hoping to summon the naughty fun of its time period, they also offer the film's clearest articulation of acceptable group membership. The vast majority of bodies lavished as spectacle are those of white men, all of whom are thin, muscular, and lacking any visible physical disabilities. The latter point feels underlined when Barton Benes tells the camera about being hit on by a man in a bathhouse with only one leg, recounting the story as an embarrassing moment of discomfort, in contrast to the other sexual encounters that are relished with joy. A slightly exclusionary world peeks through the film's utopian exaltation of its sexual milieu in rare glimpses. With the exception of Alvin Baltrop, all of the men narrating the documentary are white.[61] A widely-circulated image in the film's release strategy, later re-purposed for the DVD cover, displayed three men standing with

[61] Despite the overall whiteness of the film, one narrator– music producer Mel Cheren– does discuss the centrality of Black artists, performers, and audiences to the entire Disco scene that became intertwined with this specific era of gay male nostalgia.

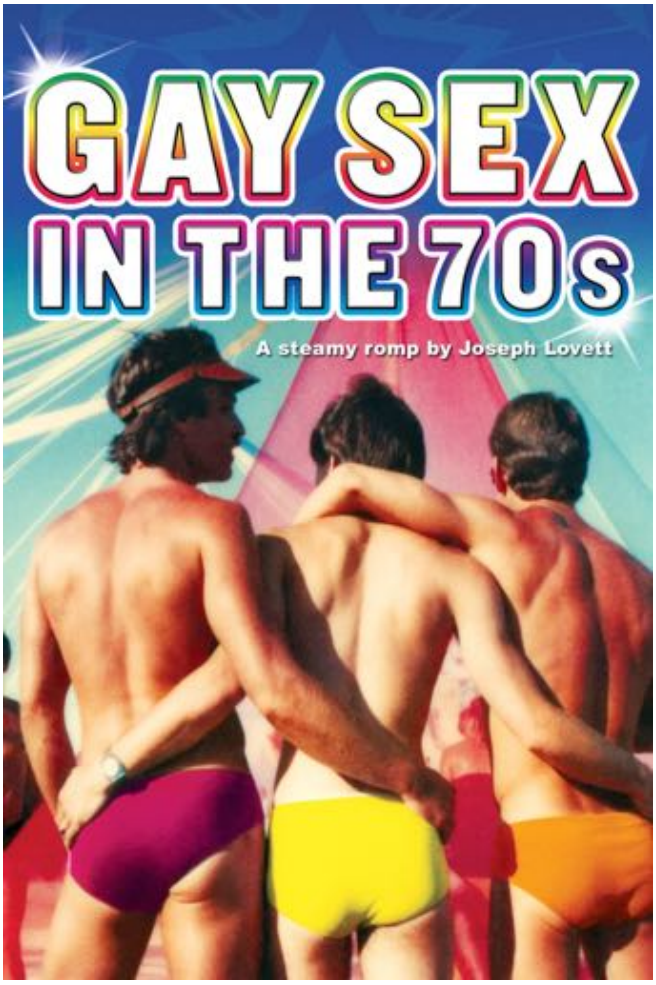

Figure 4.3 – A poster celebrating the release of *Gay Sex in the 70s* (dir. Joseph Lovett, 2005) (https://gaysexinthe70s.com/reviews/).

naked backs to the camera, arms around one another just above their tightly packed swim briefs, as if gazing off to a horizon of possibility (Figure 4.3). In light of the film's representational frameworks, faintly indicating for whom this sexual utopia was *not* an option, the image begins to feel less like a fantasy accessible to all, and more an emblem of restricted group belonging.

Heritage films like *Gay Sex in the 70s* are important, and in their detailed evocation and tribute of a cherished sexual past for queer men, it is understandable that the work of prevailing power dynamics make themselves known in insidious ways. What is therefore interesting to read is how documentary textuality responds when intra-group tensions do make themselves known. In *Gay Sex in the 70s* they are primarily sublimated and ignored, suffocated under the weight of that film's utopian positivity. In a different film from a very different LGBTQ cultural moment, *Studio 54* by Matt Tyrnauer, signs of a different queer cultural imperative are visible.

A similar experience to *Gay Sex in the 70s* in many ways– the two films even share the contributions of one narrator, Studio 54 architect Scott Bromley– *Studio 54* summons the nostalgic ideal of 70s nightlife in New York City as a wild, renegade explosion of energy.

Recounting the events of the legendary nightclub's 1977–1980 heyday, *Studio 54* utilizes the same traditional historical documentary techniques of talking head interviews and archival footage montage, this time with less punchy (and less horny) zoom and pan effects than *Gay Sex in the 70s.* Matt Tyrnauer, the film's director, has worked extensively in the field of LGBTQ historical documentary, also helming the successful *Scotty and the Secret History of Hollywood* (2017, about a male sex worker servicing male clients in Hollywood in the mid-twentieth century) and documentary portraits of infamous 20th century villain Roy Cohn and Italian fashion designer Valentino. *Scotty and the Secret History of Hollywood* is currently on its own development journey to becoming a fictionalized prestige historical drama, the kind profiled in this dissertation's second chapter, although there have been no major updates on the project since it was first announced in 2020. Tyrnauer is producing the film, and it will be directed by, in a strange twist of fate tying these chapters together, *Call Me by Your Name*'s Luca Guadagnino (Fleming Jr.).

Studio 54's wild party atmosphere is the focus of *Studio 54*'s nostalgic pleasure formation. And there are pleasures to be found. Ron Galella, a notable celebrity of the photographer of the era, shows the camera a treasure trove of rare photographs: a young Elton John grabbing the breasts of Divine as she smiles fiendishly; Truman Capote seemingly ready for bed in a monogramed robe and slippers; an angelic Dolly Parton smiling and stroking the mane of Bianca Jagger's iconic white horse. A speaker says early on in the documentary "Anyone who was allowed was totally free inside," an eerily contradictory statement of exclusion and conditional euphoria. This reflects the very tension animating much of the documentary: one in-between the radical freedom Studio 54 represented and the pragmatic strategy and celebrity courting it required as a successful business endeavor. The strange, nervous, fame-hungry energy

of club founder Steve Rubell, the film's primary subject besides the club itself, epitomizes this balance.

Whereas *Gay Sex in the 70s* favors the close-up, literally punching in on buttocks and torsos to get as close to its hyped fleshly delights as possible, *Studio 54* prioritizes long shots in archival footage that emphasize the enormity of the club's attendance as broad spectacle. Using sensory audio cues similar to *Gay Sex in the 70s,* which simulates the ambient noise of the New York waterfront piers, a sequence in *Studio 54* begins with a muffled version of "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" by Sylvester, one barely audible under the clamor of a jubilant party crowd. Halfway through, the muffled effects end for a full intense aural clarity as the song hits its chorus; an audio simulation of giving in to the ecstasy of the music. The multiracial nature of Studio 54's coalition of attendees is stressed throughout the film, the club as a liminal space of multiracial queer and trans exceptionalism validated and honored if only for a fleeting moment. *Studio 54* hosts a space-based nostalgia (it's literally called *Studio 54),* emphasizing a physical space holding a diversity of attendees, rather than *Gay Sex in the 70s*'s identity-based nostalgia of particular clan membership. In this change there is an implicit desire to broaden the reach of this nostalgic pleasure's affectivity across a wider coalition of counter-culture. Yet in the maxim "Anyone who was allowed was totally free inside" there remains a central effacement of social exclusion. Both documentaries attempt to ignore or downplay vectors of social exclusion, but their central messaging differs, *Studio 54* hosting a very late-2010s *pretense* of inclusivity that is key to its nostalgic pleasure.

LGBTQ documentary has always been a critical site for how this discursive question of broader queer collectivity is interpreted and formatted. *Word is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives,* the landmark 1977 documentary about gay men and lesbian women, which could be said

to have started this genre– *and simultaneously* houses the milieu of 70s queer world nostalgia these more recent documentaries are so ravenous for– participated in much of the same process.[62] The film is literally "made" by a collective of different artists working as one, the Mariposa Film Group. Greg Youmans has argued the film was a critical step in even articulating "a unified 'gay and lesbian movement'," shaping the divergent political organizing communities of gay men and lesbian women into a politically-coherent whole (27).[63] The queer 1970s in LGBTQ documentary are alternately represented as a halcyon sexual paradise for queer men, in *Gay Sex in the 70s* (2005)*,* and a site of ambiguous rowdy coalition in the later film *Studio 54* (2018)*. The Dog,* with a 2013 release in-between the two, finds issues of difference and intra-group tension harder to explain away and instead externalizes them in insecure mixed messaging.

4.4 Mediating John Wojtowicz

Allison Berg and Frank Keraudren's 2013 documentary *The Dog,* focusing on John Wojtowicz and the real events behind and after his 1972 attempted bank robbery, utilizes much of the same traditional historical documentary techniques as *Gay Sex in the 70s* and *Studio 54.* Pop music is used as a constant aural blanket securing our relationship to an aggregate of ideas about the '70s. "Easin' In" by Edwin Starr and "Papa Was a Rollin' Stone" by The Temptations contextualize New York City and the gay nightlife of which Wojtowicz and Liz Eden were a part. Eden is introduced with sultry panache to "Time of the Season" by The Zombies. The film

[62] Even the subtitle, stories of "some" of our lives, seems to directly reference the tension of representational images standing in for a broad diversity of identities.

[63] As Youmans recounts in *Word is Out: A Queer Film Classic,* it had been one of the filmmaker's, Peter Adair's, goal to create a parity of queer men and women working on the film, and as a result the film's production was frequently torn between the goals of gay men and lesbian women (as well as separatists and assimilations, white queers and Black queers, etc) that were seen as in-conflict. Youmans writes, "However successful the film is at presenting an image of harmony, its production history created forums in which queer people passed judgment and gave voice to their prejudice about other queer people who were different from themselves" (25).

ends to “Life is Strange” by T. Rex, a song curiously also used as the ending for a LGBTQ prestige historical drama from the same year, *Dallas Buyers Club* (dir. Jean-Marc Vallée, 2013). The film won Academy Awards for its stars Matthew McConaughey and Jared Leto, and, also similarly to *The Dog,* dealt with controversy over its trans representation (Leto plays a trans woman in the film). The commonality suggests a narrowing archive of pop songs that signify LGBTQ historicity in conventional cinematic text. Older jazz music and songs from the Great American Songbook– “We May Never Pass This Way Again” by Hal David and “Forever and Ever” by Perry Como– are used early on in the film to underscore Wojtowicz’s first marriage to his cis woman wife, Carmen Bifulco, with whom he had two children. Starting from a position of conventionality, to register the cultural transition of the 1960s, the later pop songs are summoned to emphasize Wojtowicz as a blooming queer man, similar to *Gay Sex in the 70s*’ play with comparing photographs.

The 70s pop music is a natural fit for Wojtowicz, for as far as the documentary is concerned; he embodies his particular era of queer masculinity. Vulgar, gregarious, and with a million stories, the film presents Wojtowicz as an eccentric relic of a freer, sexually transgressive moment of history, lapping up his stories with a nostalgic glow (Figure 4.4). He tells numerous stories of having sex with men and women and living a party lifestyle of wild abandon, all delivered in a gruff New York accent with considerable charm. In one moment of the film, he calls a harbor seal at the Brooklyn Aquarium an “asshole” and then moments later beckons it to him with the promise of a blowjob. Wojtowicz seems to identify first and foremost as a

"pervert"; it's a word he uses to describe himself more than any other descriptor. This mode of self-identification also possesses a nostalgic ring with the queerer blur of identity suggested in 1970s queer worlds, less rooted in fixed sexual categories and joyfully re-claiming the disreputable.

Figure 4.4 – John Wojtowicz as he appears throughout *The Dog*.

This cultural narrative is echoed in Wojtowicz's own gay-epiphany story, a horny acquiescence to surprise bunkside military fellatio while serving in the Vietnam War, that, at least as he narrates it, is remarkably free of any kind of inner conflict, stigma, or fear. Wojtowicz remembers:

> When I went to basic training, that's when I had my first gay experience. I met a hillbilly by the name of Wilbur. One night I was dreamin' that I was gettin' a blowjob, instead it was the real thing and Wilbur was blowing me. And just before I came I woke up and I go "What are you doin'?" and he said "Well doesn't it feel good?" and I said "Yea it feels good," he said "Well?" I said "Well keep on goin'," and then we kept having this relationship, because he blew great. He was like a summer breeze!

Wojtowicz strikes a similarly frank, sex-motivated tone throughout the film. The non-judgmental frame of his remembrance– where going through with a gay sexual encounter seems to be treated with all the weight of a bemused shrug– resonates with a context of open sexuality, and particularly the queer male nostalgic fantasy of constantly available sex in the time period. *The*

Dog uses a montage of photographs of Wojtowicz amidst other soldiers in Vietnam, emphasizing moments of him touching other men and smiling flirtatiously. In one, he kisses another soldier on the cheek. Wojtowicz summarizes that his experiences in Vietnam, and what he perceived as a callous disregard for the lives of American soldiers, radicalized him from a "Goldwater conservative" to a "McCarthy peacenik," but the film seems to have other intentions with the archival photographs. Similar to *Gay Sex in the 70s* deployment of the iconography of masculine bodies, *The Dog*'s Vietnam War nostalgia articulates a vibe of sexual potential located in homo-social spaces and environments. Another kind of wink towards the hedonism of the time period, one queering patriotic military service, this stylistic effort also seems to harken back to the common narrative of military service being a key node in the development of early queer male social publics.

In *The Dog,* John Wojtowicz *is* the queer 1970s: brash, loud, grimy, with a full libido in an endless party. The film also makes considerable efforts to code him positively as a passionate man whom others find endearing. He is shown, as an old man, taking care of his brother Tony, who has an intellectual disability. The characterization of Wojtowicz as warm, even friendly, is consistent with the depiction first proffered by Al Pacino in *Dog Day Afternoon,* and the surrounding news coverage of the robbery. The bank manager he held hostage was alleged to have said to Wojtowicz "I'm supposed to hate you guys, but I've had more laughs tonight than I've had in weeks" (quoted in Morrison 64). The documentary utilizes Wojtowicz, with considerable respect, as a kind of historian and tour guide, as he shows the camera around the West Village explaining what has changed and what remains the same. In Christopher Street Park, Wojtowicz approaches George Segal's *Gay Liberation* sculpture and recounts another story of in-community tension, this time between White and non-white gay activists over the

whiteness of its representation. Predictably, Wojtowicz quickly redirects to the strictly sexual: "Usually I come into the city for one of two things: money or body. Usually it's body!"

4.5 Mediating Liz Eden

Liz Eden's role in the nostalgic imaginary hosted by the film is significantly more complex (Figure 4.5). Eden died long before the filming of the documentary, in 1987 of AIDS-related pneumonia. Through this absence, her presence in the documentary is limited, filtered through Wojtowicz and other talking head subjects. Eden is dead-named throughout the film by Wojtowicz and other subjects, a phrase in trans activist circles that refers to a trans person being labeled against their will with the name they used prior to their gender transition. This isn't a failure on the part of the filmmakers– as they endeavor to capture exactly what Wojtowicz and the other subjects are saying, and how they choose to say it, that lack of censorship is valid to the film's documentary goals. What is more objectionable is the lack of context the filmmakers provide to the politics of identity and address as it applies to Liz Eden. While popular understanding of trans identity has increased demonstrably since the film's release date, 2013 was still late enough that conversations about naming and the ethics therein were lively and accessible, especially amongst producers of LGBTQ media.

Figure 4.5 – A glamorous headshot of Eden from the Liz Eden Papers (https://gaycenter.org/archive-collection/liz-eden-papers/).

The instinct to let Wojtowicz frame the story and how it is told in regards to Eden is reflected in other aspects of the film, primarily in how Eden's version of events seems to have been ignored. According to Wojtowicz, the tensions in their relationship largely developed from Eden's own burgeoning discovery of her trans identity and the subsequent mental turbulence it caused her. *The Dog* deploys one subject as a supposed source on Eden– Jeremiah Newton, billed as a friend of her's. Newton's primary contributions to the film are to insist on Eden's persistent melancholy state, and to suggest she regretted her gender affirming surgery. Newton opines "It wasn't what she should have done to herself," telling the camera that her unhappiness led to her working as a sex worker, which led to her contraction of AIDS. The film paints her story as a tragedy. Wojtowicz's reveling in the muck and grime of a sexual gay 1970s is depicted with a playful nostalgic frisson, while Eden's life in the same world is seen as exclusively the plight of an unhappy, socially isolated person.

Liz Eden's personal papers and photographs, including a manuscript of her account of the events surrounding the robbery and her relationship with Wojtowicz, are housed at the archives of the LGBTQ Center in New York City, where they have been since 1990. This archive was accessed by the filmmakers of *The Dog,* and is credited in the film. I visited these archives in 2022 because I was interested in their relationship to the creation of a very nostalgic film, one that is able to feel the currents of a queer male nostalgia but stops abruptly when it comes to a trans consideration of the same milieu. The nostalgia, it seems, cannot be shared. Visiting an archive is another kind of nostalgic experience, a way in which LGBTQ subjects like myself are motivated by currents of sentiment to potentially feel communion with another time and place of gender and sexual non-normativity. But the archives are a reminder of the positive and negative

affects both discoverable in the past. In them I hoped to discover an alternate form of mediation, apart from the documentary, that presents the subjects and events differently.

In contrast to the aforementioned nostalgia Abram J. Lewis exhibited for trans worlds of the 1970s, Eden's account of the early seventies reveals she had very little to be nostalgic about. Against viewing the queer 70s as a monolithic location, Eden's personal account of her life speaks of a lack of access to worlds of trans affirmation, and instead a person feeling adrift and unsupported in principally gay worlds. In Esther Newton's foundational work on drag queens, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (1972), she describes the hostility of cis gay male drag queens towards emergent concepts of trans womanhood; it is not hard to imagine Eden navigating the same world and its attendant obstacles.

Liz Eden's papers contain a variety of materials. Included are a lot of Christmas cards sent to her from prison by Wojtowicz. In the cards, he alternates using her current and former names frequently, with no clear temporal order nor progression, indicating perhaps a confused mindset or mixed set of obligations. Also present are the remnants of several lawsuits she pursued against magazines using her likeness without her expressed permission, including one with *Female Impersonator News* where she specifically objected to a "before-and-after" comparison of her body pre and post surgery. Jeremiah Newton, the man stressed by *The Dog* as a close friend of her's, makes no appearance in the archival documents.

Of particular interest in the Liz Eden Papers is her manuscript of the events of the robbery and afterwards, dictated to her attorney Richard N. Barraclough. In the manuscript, Eden comes across as a charming, slightly irritated, and thoroughly exhausted self-advocate. Eden has stories of ribald 70s sexual extremity to rival Wojtowicz's– at one point she becomes lost recounting affairs she had with several different ordained priests. She describes notable cruising

scenes involving the back of trucks, and playfully implies her lawyer knows exactly what she's talking about ("But you know what gross fun that is") (Eden 1). Her story is different from that of *The Dog*'s and emphasizes a relationship of polarized highs and lows, with an abusive partner in Wojtowicz, who was physically violent and could never quite reconcile her trans identity with the male lover he desired. Eden frames the bank robbery as a fervent last-minute decision made by Wojtowicz to win her back, after she had spent months running from him at different friends' apartments, while also being in and out of hospitalization for repeated suicide attempts. Eden characterized her suicidal tendencies and mental instability as being not the result of her trans identity, but rather her fear of her abusive boyfriend. Eden was on hormonal therapy at the time of her relationship with Wojtowicz, and though she later affirms she felt gratitude for her surgeries, in her manuscript she describing suggesting surgical intervention initially as a desperate hope to ward off Wojtowicz, thinking it would make him lose interest in her sexually (27). The story projected from Eden's manuscript is one of a trans woman doing everything she could to survive against a queer cis man who in many ways refused to see her clearly. Wojtowicz's abusive streak is not necessarily hidden by either *Dog Day Afternoon* or *The Dog,* but the mentions are fleeting, and don't do much to impact the broader flow of sentimental nostalgia for the period.

There are moments of nostalgic pleasure in Eden's manuscript, for her and by transference for the reader. To Barraclough she reminisces about her very first time walking at a drag ball in Harlem: "It was the first dress I ever put on. It was an Empire vee [sic.] neckline evening gown in emerald green brocade with a matching twelve button…mandarin collar long coat with green satin shoes and yellow hair" (35–36). For whatever reason, moments like this do not find their way into *The Dog,* along with the majority of Eden's perspective. As far as I can

tell, the filmmakers used the resources at the LGBTQ Center archives primarily for the photographs included of Eden and her life. Overall, *The Dog* is a case where gay nostalgia and a recognition of trans life seem incompatible in their textual representation; one overrides the other. *The Dog* chooses the side of the hedonistic eccentricity embodied by Wojtowicz, and in turn minimizes Eden's pains, and erases the possibilities of her joy from the narrative. But there is one brief scene in the documentary that, while not fully reconciling the intra-group gay vs trans division at the heart of the conflict, uniquely lays bare the contested nature of the film.

Towards the end of *The Dog,* the film documents both Wojtowicz and Eden as they milk their remaining niche micro-celebrity for all its worth. Eden goes on *The Jeanne Parr Show,* where the host plays a recorded message to her from Wojtowicz in prison. Much later, after Wojtowicz's release, the two end up together on a NYC public access program called *Let's Talk Dirty with Marc Stevens,* hosted by a retired pornographic film star. Wojtowicz and Eden's relegation to pornography-adjacent programming suggests a lot about their cultural reputation afforded to their distinct brand of celebrity, and also finds them forever marked by the sexual spirit of the 1970s. Stevens mispronounces Wojtowicz's name and seems distracted throughout the interview. The surviving footage, incorporated into *The Dog,* shows signs of decay, VHS tape distortion running through the image on screen as Wojtowicz and Eden sit on a couch, with Stevens holding a microphone in-between the two of them.

Stevens hypes up Wojtowicz's robbery as a romantic act of sacrifice for her gender identity, which Eden, eyes almost completely hidden under a mushroom-like hairdo, quickly deflates, bringing up the long-running rumors of Wojtowicz's mob connections. Wojtowicz then attempts to seize control of the narrative, speaking directly to the camera: "All you have to remember is…I robbed the bank to get Liz the sex change, even though I was against her getting

the sex change, and that was the only reason I robbed the bank." Eden counters threateningly "Did you leave anything out?," with Stevens awkwardly swerving back and forth to catch both on the microphone (he says to the camera "I feel like I'm playing ping-pong here!"). The film has slowed to a real-time progression, with no era-appropriate backing music to safely pad, leaving only tense silence. After a few evasive mumblings, Wojtowicz admits "The truth is, if Liz wasn't going on the plane with me to get the sex change operation, I would have blown her fucking ass away." Stevens seems rattled by the admission of a genuine, albeit vague, threat. At this point, Eden begins to speak again, airing the narrative the film, until just now, has been trying to obscure:

> It's alright to say you're in love with somebody, and it's all fine and good, but he also put me through a whole year of getting letters every day that said "You have 28 days to live," "You have 26 days to live," "You have 15 days to live"; of course I left him. The thing that led me into the mental institution, which everyone talks about, is the fact that I got these threatening notes, all the way down to #1, and I figured since it's my birthday and everything else was fine why don't I just kill myself, it would end all this, and that's just what I did I tried to kill myself. And you think I really wanted someone to rob a bank? I got the shaft! I might have wanted the sex change, but I got the raw shaft, I can't enjoy it!

Behind distorted VHS footage, on a small public access show, with Eden partially obscured by her hair and mediated decay, this scene stands out in sharp contrast to the remainder of *The Dog*'s narrative. Effectively the "punctum" to the "studium" of gay documentary's established nostalgic gloss over the 1970s, to use terminology by Roland Barthes, Eden's statement "is sharp and yet lands in a vague zone of myself; it is acute yet muffled, it cries out in silence." It is an "odd contradiction: a floating flash" (Barthes *Camera Lucida* 51-53).

Jeremiah Newton had stressed throughout *The Dog* the "symbiotic link" connecting John Wojtowicz to Liz Eden. A more nuanced understanding would focus on how the two were bound together by their shared tabloid celebrity, and somewhat forced into remaining in each others' lives in order to protect a fleeting source of income from the media industries; a lifeline for two people who had rarely been financially stable. As Eden says, she may have gotten the sex change but she "can't enjoy it"; it's tied thoroughly to an abusive relationship occasionally re-activated for the purposes of a brutal financial pragmatism. Susan Morrison, describing the film in an article for *CineAction,* notes that Wojtowicz's representation does grow darker over the running time of the film: "the more we find out, the more horrified we become; the charming uncensored 'Sonny' gradually turns before our eyes into the egotistical sex-obsessed blowhard 'John,' who's blithely unaware of the effect his actions had/have on other people" (67).[64] Despite this shift, in part enabled by this island within the film that is *Let's Talk Dirty with Marc Stevens,* the larger discourses of the film's nostalgia remain in place, in a curious mixed messaging.

The Dog ends in a downcast place. The postscript for the film mentions the deaths of not just Eden and Wojtowicz, who died shortly after production was completed, but also the two other major interviewees of the film intimately involved with the story: Wojtowicz's first wife Carmen Bifulco and his mother Theresa "Terry" Wojtowicz.[65] Wojtowicz's weight fluctuates dramatically throughout filming as he struggles with both breast cancer and skin cancer. At the end of the film, *The Dog* appears to let Wojtowicz offer a closing message for the story: "Do

[64] Even writing this, Morrison makes no mention of Eden in her article. She focuses instead on her valid discomfort with the questionable understanding of sexual consult Wojtowicz seems to have in his recollections of sexual trysts.
[65] Terry Wojtowicz is an interesting character in *The Dog* that projects her own possible queerness in a subtle way. Interviewed about her relationship with Wojtowicz's deceased father, she admits some apathy about him and complains "You can have fifty men in your life if you want 'em. But who the hell wants 'em?" Terry Wojtowicz seems frequently as disadvantaged and discomfited by heteronormativity as her son. She mentions a habit of stalking her son while he went to his Gay Activist Alliance meetings, lurking just at the periphery of queer male life in the 70s in voyeuristic fascination, and never confessing anything to John. She also attended John's imitation wedding to Eden.

what you want to do cause tomorrow you could be dead. Live each day like it's your last." This endorsement for individual desire possesses a troubled ring in a film that lays bare, without any kind of resolution, deep divides across LGBTQ political collectivity. The film's use of nostalgia begs us to consider its role in articulating LGBTQ narratives of history; where nostalgia is specifically deployed as a force of occlusion, and how it can hope to be more generative. *The Dog* emphasizes the difficulties in formulating a coalitional nostalgia, against both a strain of utopian queer politics that calls for inclusivity and intersectionality, and the ongoing market organization of LGBTQ media that lumps media of gender and sexual difference all in the same place. In mediating Liz Eden, the film showcases an ongoing contested hegemony over nostalgic iconography, the punctum in the studium, that even expressions of difference cannot be totally evacuated by sentimental narratives of heritage.

4.6 Conclusion: Towards a Coalitional Queer Nostalgia with *FlyHole*

If the 1970s present an attachment-archive rife with possibility for acts of queer and trans world-making, representations in mainstream LGBTQ documentary as a generic institution suggest it is difficult to share this iconography in a broad discourse of queer community. Individual texts frequently direct towards more occlusive rhetorics of nostalgia that emphasize community belonging in a stricter sense of membership– rooted in iconographies of the body, or otherwise fetishized boundaries of limited access. I'm of two minds on this set of issues. On the one hand, there is no need to mandate all expressions of LGBTQ nostalgia need be free of specific contextualization, applying to a broad coalition of identities in every act of community enunciation. To do so would deny the importance of specific community histories and the affective draw and political utility of intimately shared experience. At the same time, to follow

the ethical directive of *queer* as its own affective formation, it seems to me that striving for queer and trans images of a coalitional nostalgia has its own political utility worth fighting for. Muñoz's original framing of queer utopianism depends on this notion, of queerness as an ever-stretching horizon that finds its sense of potential within the queer past. Works furthering the affective spread of gay nostalgia, like Castiglia and Reed's scholarship as well as the documentary *The Dog,* showcase what can happen when this queer ethos of intersectional coalition is abandoned. In those texts, different varieties of LGBTQ nostalgia suddenly become more harmful political projects.

A film emerging from the world of trans experimental cinema showcases, to me, a crossing of affective categories amongst the LGBTQ community that produces a generative engagement with queerness' treasured iconographies of the 1970s. *FlyHole* is a 2017 film by Malic Amalya taking the shape of a dual projection slide show of collaged images, running just under six minutes in length (Figure 4.6). Amalya is a trans man and a professor of experimental media at Emerson College. Though originating as 35mm slide mounts, *FlyHole* is most often shown via a digital video copy. Amalya's commitment to the analog format, which is photocopied and taped into the textuality of a digital film, recalls work such as the photographic slide show art of Nan Goldin, and radical queer art of the 1980s.

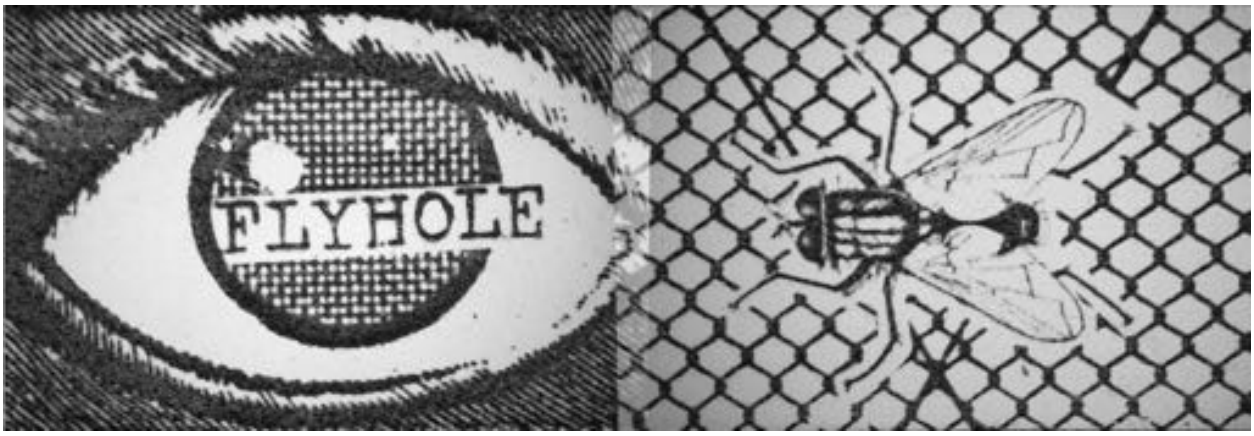

Figure 4.6 – Title screen of *FlyHole* (dir. Malic Amalya, 2017).

The film uses an archival document itself– an issue of the adult gay magazine *Manscape* from 1985– and repurposes a piece of written erotica titled "The Dildo in My Pocket." In Amalya's artist statement, he describes the story:

> The original story is about a "woman" who "disguises herself" as a man in order to pursue the gay man "she" is in love with. Despite using outdated language and transphobic tropes, the story accurately depicts the concerns and fears many trans-masculine people have about passing, takes seriously the gay desires that some trans-masculine people have for men, and portrays the main character as a competent lover, capable of bringing a cis gay man– and, presumably, *Manscape*'s readers– to orgasm.

Amalya keeps key words in quotes to question the cis-gendered assumptions inherent in the original story. In so doing, he opens the idea of the story's reception amongst trans readers at the time and since, a gesture that "holds onto *Manscape*'s trans-masculine history." Amalya makes some refurbishments to the story: rather than occupy a gender binary in any way, the act of masquerade motivating the story's tension is re-contextualized as a housefly who transforms into a human man to cruise the gay bars. The fear and paranoia of discovery is displaced onto a human/animal divide rather than the original text's bi-gender framework. An encounter at a gay

bar glory hole allows the sexual union between the two characters to transpire, with the aid of a trusty dildo (Figure 4.7). As Amalya describes, ideally the story has the potential to pleasure across gay *and* trans lines. The visuals on the slides are a collage composite of text, the original illustrations of the *Manscape* story by Mike Kuchard, and Amalya's own additions.

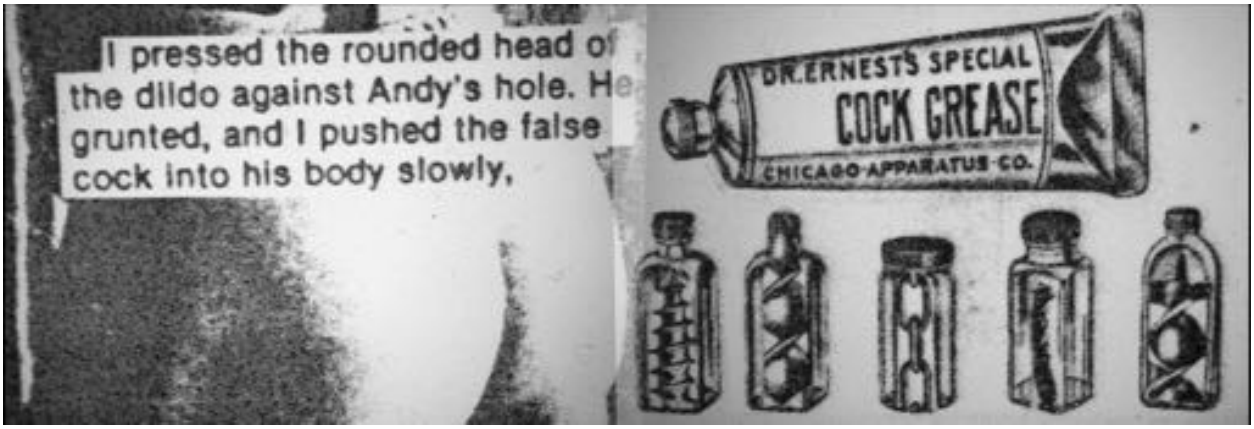

Figure 4.7 – The protagonist housefly in *FlyHole* is able to penetrate Andy with a dildo.

Although somewhat removed from the milieu the rest of this chapter explores, due to the story's 1985 publication, both "The Dildo in My Pocket" and *FlyHole* build on a legacy of gay sex clubs articulated through the hedonistic tint of the gay 1970s as a cultural aggregate. They respond to, as both Castiglia & Reed and the narrators of *Gay Sex in the 70s* emphasize, "the systems of cultural communication and care that proved the best– often the only– response to disease, backlash, and death (*If Memory Serves* 3)." Aurally the heavy thud of changing slides is preserved, though occasionally drowned out by the ambient noises of a gay bar, moaning, and the buzzing of the fly. *FlyHole*'s central feat of identification– across the human/animal boundary– succeeds through the poignancy with which ideas of passing are extrapolated away from the story's original contexts towards other kinds of reconciliation between body, identity, and visuality.

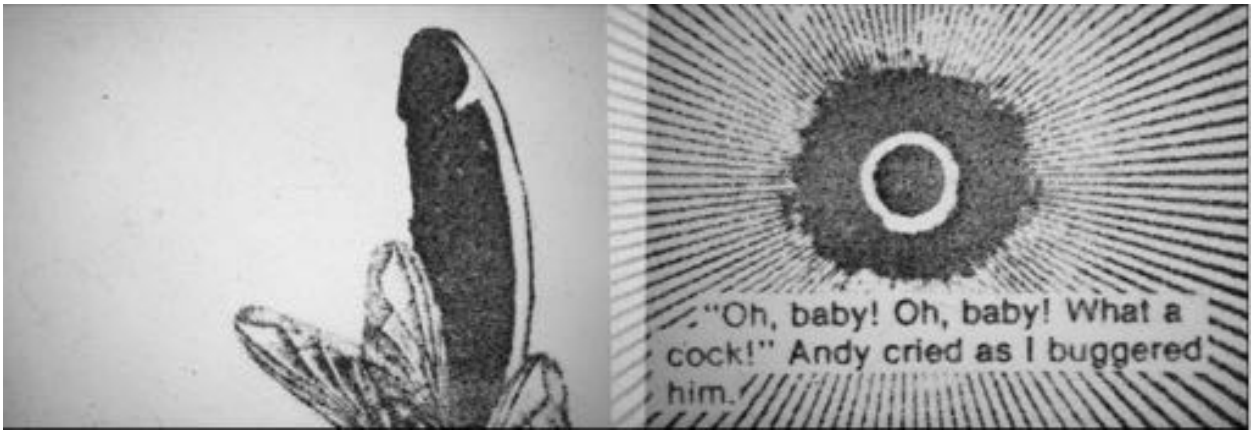

Figure 4.8 – *FlyHole* frequently returns to the visual of a shadow outline of a penis with two insect wings sprouting near its base

A visual to which the short film returns frequently is that of a shadowy outline of a penis with two insect wings sprouting near its base (Figure 4.8). The image suggests a reworking of traditional icons of masculinity and queer identity, creatively re-interpreting images that compel group identification. *FlyHole* finds inspiration in the archives across disparate channels of LGBTQ identity, allowing the two to converge in a way that both creatively reimagines their utilities as queer/trans iconography *and* references a shared history that did and does converge in surprising ways, many not fully capturable by the historical record. Using a canon of conventional gay nostalgia– the erotica of *Manscape*– and applying it towards a trans re-understanding of the past, *FlyHole* is a historiographic project that celebrates and nourishes both affective formations of nostalgia. So doing, it provides a compelling model for what a *coalitional* nostalgia in LGBTQ media would look like.

Scott Bravmann, in *Queer Fictions of the Past,* ends his text with the exploration for a mode he describes as "post-modern queer historical" representation (120). Given the text's mid-90s publication (1997), the lack of discussion of trans identity and history is not too notably surprising. Yet even so, in a passage on the post-modern, Bravmann describes an approach to historicity that sounds a lot like the cultural work of *FlyHole*:

> Self-consciously performative rather than descriptive historical accounts, their [post-modern queer historical writers'] texts cross boundaries and pursue new approaches to historical representation that enable them to reanimate the past as an active presence and to problematize the distinction between literal and figurative meanings in popular memory, social practice, and collective debates on identity and difference (121).

This kind of "reanimation" suggests exciting possibilities for the work of nostalgic affect in communicating LGBTQ historicity in media work to come.

I first saw *FlyHole* while conducting field work for the next chapter, on LGBTQ film festivals. If the inherent diversity of LGBTQ as a public appears difficult to reconcile in the space of individual media textualities, the complicated media public that is a film festival provided a rich site that does depend on an ambivalent mixture of feelings, and the many reconciliations between different nodes of queer cultural transmission. Narratives of LGBTQ nostalgia inform the construction of documentary media, and reveal the power dynamics implicit within those narratives and the challenges facing their operationalization. The next chapter turns to a sphere of media influence where the impact of underpinning political philosophies feels looser and more subject to audience negotiation.

Chapter 5 Over the Corporate Rainbow: LGBTQ Film Festivals and Affective Media Networks

5.1 Introduction: Clawing, Spitting, and Hissing Together

At the 1987 LA International Gay & Lesbian Film/Video Festival, a mix of old and new greeted festival attendees.[66] The festival opened with two heavily-buzzed new releases, both arriving in Los Angeles from successful premieres at the 1986 Berlin Film Festival: Gus Van Sant's *Mala Noche* and Léa Pool's *Anne Trister.* Reflecting a festival imperative for balance and coalitional programming, the two were chosen as dual premieres targeting disparate audiences of queer men and queer women. The festival began in earnest in 1983 on the campus of UCLA as a selection of notable entries in the canon of classic queer cinema, including Richard Oswald's 1919 silent film *Different from Others,* Leontine Sagan's *Mädchen in Uniform* (1931), and retrospectives on the careers of Kenneth Anger and Rainer Werner Fassbinder.[67] Appropriate to its scholarly setting, the festival positioned itself as an educator, one curating from the archive of queer cinemas past to shape the role of queer cinema cultures present. By 1987, this imperative had already been modified to include the spectacle and promise of new films fresh from the festival circuit such as *Mala Noche* and *Anne Trister,* laden with the buzz and shimmer of new cinematic style, while simultaneously seeking commercial viability and further distribution. This anticipates the festival's changing role from a modest sub-cultural exhibitor to part of the major

[66] A version of this chapter was previously published in *New Review of Film and Television Studies* in 2022. It's included in the Works Cited under Donovan.
[67] An earlier one-night film screening event in 1982 with three films is known as the official first "UCLA Gay and Lesbian Media Festival."

Figure 5.1 – Program cover for the 1987 LA International Gay & Lesbian Film/Video Festival featuring Sergei Eisenstein (photo taken at the UCLA Active Research and Study Center).

film festival economy, where, according to Marijke de Valck, "people, power, and prestige tend to concentrate" (36). This is a world the festival would become more fully aligned with in its current name, Outfest, which it adopted officially in 1994. But the proto-Outfest wasn't entirely dominated by a cutting-edge look into the *present* of queer cinema opportunity.

A gloriously garish image of Sergei Eisenstein graced the cover of the 1987 festival program. Against a blue background, the legendary film pioneer is cheekily lounging across a gilded throne, with fey crossed legs and an inscrutable smile, suggesting all manner of queer cinematic deviance (Figure 5.1). The LA International Gay & Lesbian Film/Video Festival's appropriation of Eisenstein's image playfully honors the potential of scandalous queer frivolity, even if located in the distant past. Flipping through the 1987 program during my visit to Outfest's archive of materials located at UCLA, another proverbial foot in the past caught my eye: a midnight screening of John Cromwell's *Caged* (1950), for $5 at the Four Star Theater on Wilshire Boulevard, Friday February 20th (Figure 5.2). The festival called on *Caged*'s reputation within a pantheon of "camp classics," texts resonating with queer audiences for their spectacular excess

and "discreet" queer coding that for a contemporary spectator looks anything but. With its capitalizations preserved, the program description reads:

> *This camp classic SEETHES with the underworld characters of a 'woman in prison' picture. With some of the BITCHIEST lines ever in a Hollywood flick, lesbianism stereotypically appears as a product of a TORTUROUS, OUTLAWED mini-society within prison walls. Hope Emerson plays the STEEL-CLAWED matron– butch, sadistic, and a KILLER! Lee Patrick seduces her fellow inmates into prostitution with a sweet smile and a LECHEROUS gaze. Eleanor Parker demures. Stay up late to CLAW, SPIT, and HISS at the 50's.*

FRIDAY, February 20
8:30 PM
MALA NOCHE
(See Opening Night for description)
10:00 PM
ANNE TRISTER
(See Opening Night for description)
SATURDAY, February 21
4:00 PM
THE PASSION OF REMEMBERANCE
Director: Isaac Julien and Maureen Blackwood
8:30 PM
WESTLER
(East of the Wall)
Los Angeles Premiere
Director: Wieland Speck
midnight
CAGED
Director: John Cromwell
SUNDAY, February 22
4:00 PM
VERONICA 4 ROSE
(The Eleventh Hour)
West Coast Premiere
Director: Melanie Chait
7:30 PM
SEBASTIANE
9:30 PM
JE TU IL ELLE
Los Angeles Premiere
Director: Chantal Akerman

Figure 5.2 – 1987 LA International Gay & Lesbian Film/Video Festival Program featuring description of midnight screening of *Caged* (photo taken at the UCLA Active Research and Study Center).

Prison exploitation cinema, for all its embodiment of a toxic U.S. ideology of fearing and spectacularizing incarcerated people to shore up a culture of punishment, has found its way into many camp archives through the forced proximity of same-sex characters and the heavily dramatized specter of queer prison sexuality. The heightened cinematic language, and the reference to true homophobic violence and pain that comes along with it, brings out queer potential, and a camp transformation to a frisson of joy. "Clawing," "spitting," and "hissing," while aggressive emotional acts, are here recoded as outbursts of community pleasure. Watching films like *Caged* against-the-grain, queer audiences greet ungainly monsters of heteronormative

creation, like Hope Emerson's devilish butch matron, with divine and ironic celebration, amounting to a kind of séance resuscitation of resistant queer spectators, who couldn't gather so openly in such a public sphere at the film's original time of release.

Never leaving its role as educator behind, the proto-Outfest evolved to indexing queer cinematic history through emotional and aesthetic appeals like these as opposed to a scholarly overview of "the canon." The invitation to "CLAW, SPIT, and HISS" at history locates the past as an aggregate of specific queer cultural significations that can be expressed, explored, and endured communally, both for pleasure and for pain, in the space of a film festival. We are hailed not just as queer consumers of media but as viewers with an emotional orientation pitched towards collecting fragments of a shared history to be read through a queer lens. The discursive work of LGBTQ film festival programming in the archives reveals a central truth of the cultural organization of LGBTQ film festivals: affective intensity is a strategic operating principle promised to act as a binding agent for the members of the media public it convenes. As Sara Ahmed writes, "emotions *do things,* and they align individuals with communities- or bodily space with social space- through the very intensity of their attachments…they…work to bind subjects together" (119). The emotions (and their predecessors, affects) of pride, in-community affection, and assertive protest are key motivations for media texts' passage through an LBGTQ film festival. The texts power the festival's affective atmosphere, and become laden with that atmosphere in turn in a system of reciprocity. Festival setting reveal the ambient pop of queer affect in a media public as its own profoundly sustaining victory, queering space and making worlds. But while it feels familiar to consider the contextually relevant effects of emotion in a raucous midnight camp-fest in 1987, this study looks into an LGBTQ film festival present to

consider how the facilitation and networking of affect has changed to meet a different cultural moment.

LGBTQ film festivals have seen better days, as the dominant narrative goes. Critics see contemporary LGBTQ film festivals as victims (and sometimes further perpetrators) of an age of homonormative mainstreaming– once lively areas of activist and artistic passion drained and commodified in line with corporate interests and the flows of global entertainment capitalism. The joyful rebellion of the past occupies one end of a discursive U.S. LGBTQ cultural memory imagining LGBTQ film festivals, with the compromised homonormative present at the other. An amorphous nostalgia for the supposed undiluted queerness of past LGBTQ film festivals defines the public rhetoric around their contemporary descendants, and is incorporated into how they operate as cultural organizations today. Intervening in this dominant narrative, this chapter suggests neither extreme of imagined rebellion/concession is completely true, but rather the structures of feeling mediating the ambivalent desires and affective currents of contemporary LGBTQ media publics. Although nostalgia is a feeling related to lack and loss, we can read this circulation of feelings not as deficiency of feeling itself, but rather a unique mutation of queer affect in the public sphere of LGBTQ film festivals. Feeling and energy are still the currency of the LGBTQ film festival, but the contexts and fodder have shifted. What if we're still clawing, spitting, and hissing– but this time at the 1990s, and the growth of the gay market? LGBTQ film festival worlds are containers for various emotional logics in vibrant, complicated ecosystems of creation and definition.

LGBTQ film festivals are powered by the communicative work of what I'm terming *affective media networks*, the organization of community feeling powered through contrasting nodes of affective transmission. Affective media networks are comprised of individual textual

satellites that can be films, advertising, screening arrangements, festival documents etc., all with the potential to be, in Steven Shaviro's words," machines for generating affect," constructing a negotiated meaning within a spectator's personal experience (3). Individual texts may muster particular affects, but melded together in a network the cumulative meaning is more complex, and a productive space for processing mixed feelings. Reading media publics with affective media networks as an investigative concept allows us to see LGBTQ film festivals as the unique public spheres they are, where media is used to sort through communities, rituals, and histories, reflecting the unique desires and affects of a specific place and time.

Jan Assmann describes "organization" as a key characteristic of cultural memory, a recognition of group pasts depending on "the institutional buttressing of communication…through formulization of the communicative situation in ceremony" (131). LGBTQ film festivals can be read as such an organizing institution, facilitating orientations to narratives of LGBTQ past. In this project I am much in line with Antoine Damiens' recent monograph *LGBTQ Film Festivals: Curating Queerness* (2020), which notes that LGBTQ film festivals are "enmeshed with the accumulation of temporalities and affects," their programming decisions and curatorial practice laced "with a peculiar relationship to history" (32). While Damiens analyzes the ephemeral knowledge formation practices of LGBTQ film festivals, often in relation to small or partially forgotten festivals, and their role in building collective memories of joy and community, this chapter considers the major LGBTQ film festival circuit in the United States for its mix of contentious and conflicting feelings, an affective zone suited to the ambivalence of LGBTQ media consumers in the 21st century. [68]

[68] In describing ambivalence as an affective form, I build on Lauren Berlant's understanding of the affect, framing disappointment as "a partner of fulfillment…central to the absorbing anxiety that gets animated by having an object of desire." Berlant considers this anxiety in relation to an object of desire "the affective copy of ambivalence, where we work out conflicting

I selected Outfest in Los Angeles as the case study for this project for its influence within the LGBTQ film festival circuit, its programming often setting the tone for other LGBTQ film festivals throughout the world. Over the course of two years (2018, 2019) I attended the festival to observe the prevailing affects networked and circulated in the space of an LGBTQ film festival. Outfest has all the complexity of a media festival– premieres and film screenings, but also panel discussions, parties, keynote addresses; many different kinds of texts to register the complicated collision of mixed feelings, alternately pleasuring and disappointing, within contemporary LGBTQ media.[69] Following an overview of the historical contexts of emotion in which LGBTQ film festivals are enmeshed, and the application of concepts like affect and network to film festival cultures, I outline two specific affective media networks– named The Rainbow and The Line– which each reveal clusters of negotiated affect that are personally experienced, but generated by the festival as its own complicated multi-dimensional textuality. "The Rainbow" refers to the proliferation of rainbow imagery surrounding the festival, its corporate sponsorship, and programmed films, while "The Line" refers to curative decisions with a felt impact in the phenomenological inhabitance of festival space. While Outfest contains many rainbows and many lines, my phrasing references a singular form to consider what the aggregate "rainbow" and "line," as a composite of many, becomes for the film festival attendee. These analyses are rooted in personal reflection and first-person accounting to gesture towards an

inclinations toward what kind of closeness and distance we want, think we want, and can bear our object to have" (13). When the object of desire for LGBTQ media consumers is an affective bond with a media text, the negotiation of closeness and distance weighs the pleasing and frustrating aspects of contemporary LGBTQ media in a relationship that can only be understood as ambivalent.

[69] Outfest in 2020 was held primarily online in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with virtual film screenings and limited online viewing windows. Alongside online screenings, the festival also hosted a series of drive-in screenings at Calamigos Ranch in Malibu (Gardner). 2021's festival adopted a hybrid model of in-person screenings and online content (Allen). Outfest executive director Damien S. Navarro released in a statement that he hoped the return of the in-person festival in 2021 "brings all the 'feels' everyone is ready for," another reflection of the importance placed on communicated feeling in LGBTQ film festival spaces (Reynolds).

embodied sense of being-in-space as key to the appeal of a film festival's precious "live event" status.[70]

I interpret affective media networks as having a textual shape that we can read and see as a kind of "coordinated logic" across different kinds of textuality. While screen media possess the mise-en-scene of visual composition, readable to draw out structures that can be tied to emotional responses, the readable textuality of film festivals is a phenomenological one, reflecting its status as a media event. Where are people directed to walk? What is the advertising like? Where is the festival taking place? All of these questions lead to programming decisions that are readable in their textuality. This research emphasizes the readability of the desires populating the film festival environment, and unique role of affect in LGBTQ film festivals particularly, as spaces notable for the historical emotions surrounding queer artistry, community belonging and definition, and commodification. LGBTQ film festivals are sites housing the management of contrasting and ambivalent queer feelings through affective media networks, where powerful affective formations like nostalgia are powered and also satiated. I explore how queer affects are maintained not in spite of, but rather because of limitations and homonormative concessions. This study views the LGBTQ film festival as a nostalgic activation, not neatly a "sell-out," but rather the maintenance of queer affect in changing political conditions.

[70] The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on film festival spaces, descending shortly after I conducted the participant observation research for this article, has fundamentally shifted what constitutes a film festival, particularly in regards to its live and in-person status. Though beyond the reach of this study, the topic nonetheless chimes with the realities of mounting a film festival during a pandemic. How is a desired, nostalgic affect of precious film festival intensity maintained in shifting conditions that redefine what we can expect from a film festival and how one is run? This is a question future researchers will need to pursue with the consideration of film festivals as affective facilitators.

5.2 Homonormative Tedium and the Nostalgic Mythos of Fallen Queer Film Festival Culture

Emotion has long been the prize, draw, and focal point of the LGBTQ film festival as discursively constructed. The histories chronicling LGBTQ film festivals in the 1980s and 1990s frequently describe them in terms of their cumulative emotional energy, recounting events coursing with excitement and passion. In a dossier on LGBTQ film festivals published by *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* in 1999, B. Ruby Rich recounts the passionate and volatile relationships between film festivals and their queer audiences over contested cinematic representation. At an unnamed LGBTQ film festival in London, Sheila McLaughlin's *She Must Be Seeing Things* (1987) creates such a fervor around issues of sexual explicitness "the antiporn lesbian audience turned militant and tried to rip the film out of the projector." A preponderance of scenes depicting straight marriage in Su Freidrich's *First Comes Love* (1991) causes queer audiences at the Toronto International Film Festival to erupt "in a fury over being forced to sit through these heterosexual ceremonies". Audiences are "angered," they "condemn," they "insist" (80), they're "furious" (81); even withstanding the negative emotions focused on by Rich, the portrait being painted is that of a righteously passionate audience, eager to take on each new representation as a site of debate and rigorous contestation. This is, in fact, Rich's interest, for even as she notes the role of respectability politics in these attendees' reactions (unfairly rejecting sexually explicit content as solely a tool of the patriarchy) she praises the passion and energy animating "the spirit of adventure" in the LGBTQ film festival space itself (84). Similarly, in 1992 Jack Halberstam described being with lesbian audiences at Frameline, San Francisco's premiere LGBTQ film festival, as an erotic experience: "Pressed together in dark rooms, watching all kinds of lesbian bodies do all kinds of things to other lesbian bodies, one had

the feeling of being at a kind of mass orgy" (qtd. in Damiens 159). The LGBTQ film festival public is an emotional animal, with highs of passion and intense engagement sought after as one of the festival's main cultural draws.

But if we return to Outfest, when I attended in 2018, the most vigorous display of audience passion I witnessed was when a woman at security was denied her small package of Fig Newtons brought from home as a snack for a documentary screening. Certainly security lines are not part of the sepia-tinged dreamscapes of radical queer festivals gone by, and neither is the venue for 2018's festival, the Samuel Goldwyn Theater, the headquarters of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, outfitted in gold everywhere you look to summon the glitz and glamour of the Oscars. As I snooped over the edge of my phone screen at the angry woman defending her right to mass-produced fig-flavored pastries, I joined audience members forming a line for an ultimately dull, self-serving documentary released by LGBTQ news outlet *The Advocate.* This film was quick to position itself at the center of a narrative of LGBTQ history emphasizing white cis gay men, and evidence of their incorporation into dominant structures of power, over other forms of queer community. Elsewhere, the bounty of LGBTQ media to pick from in the festival catalog was heartening, assuring the healthy circulation of work by LGBTQ filmmakers throughout the world. But, if the promise of LGBTQ film festivals, as expressed by its many writers and devotees, was a riotous display of vigorous passion, my experience suggested a kind of trade has been made: a legitimacy secured at the expense of becoming less radical, less fun, and overall less queer.

My experiences evokes a popular narrative of contemporary LGBTQ film festivals. Starting roughly in the mid-2000s of LGBTQ political thinking, audience mundanity, diminished passion, and mediocre content (a vast change in tone from Rich's aforementioned energized

memories) became typical narratives framing LGBTQ film festivals in the United States. Richard Fung accused LGBTQ film festivals of leaning into "political and aesthetic (self-) policing" in service of a "narrower, more…conservative take on gay and lesbian culture" (92-93). Writing for *Vulture* in 2018, E. Alex Jung placed the blame on LGBTQ film festivals for a more normative, assimilationist turn in queer media cultures overall, writing "What was once queer and fringe had been gentrified into something more easily categorizable, consumable, and thus marketable." With corporate sponsorships and a rapid investment of leading businesses in various LGBTQ economic sectors, queer cultural critics were often quick to set down a historical division: when queer was queer, and when queer went corporate.

Published discourse like the examples above speak gloriously of a 1980s-1990s moment of passionate audiences, challenging films, and a revolutionary potential that felt legitimately transgressive and powerful; a nostalgia for halcyon days. Kadji Amin describes much of queer studies in academia as "*haunted* by the electric 1990s convergence, under the banner of queer, of same-sex sexuality, political urgency, and radical transgression," a convergence that limits what objects can be called queer and the imagination of the field writ large (184-185). He continues that "Queer Studies has institutionalized…a set of historical emotions generated within U.S. queer culture and politics around the early 1990s," an institutionalization previously mentioned in the first chapter in regards to the hype and fervor surrounding queer tactility (187). Distinct from the queer academy, I find this same haunting in queer film worlds, impacting the attention and consideration given to the contemporary LGBTQ film festival when it is not seen as sufficiently "queer." This kind of nostalgia created the contemporary festival landscape as its opposite, bland and drained of queer energy.

Calls for a return to radical queer passion over the safety of middlebrow positioning are often rooted in the very real power dynamics of identity that centralize social and economic influence amongst most often cis white gay men of wealth in LGBTQ communities, and prioritize political agendas suited to their needs over trans communities and issues facing queer people of color, a strategy José Esteban Muñoz refers to as "gay pragmatism" (*Cruising Utopia,* 55). This resistant nostalgia is therefore a justified radical political position, but forms of it diverge from the promise of restoring equitable queer coalition towards something more inwardly focused. In terms of the LGBTQ film festival, it betrays a desire to remain in the past (against the inevitable change of generations, and their new challenges and participants), forsaking the LGBTQ film festival to a dull, unprepossessing present that is empty only as long as it is actively hollowed out to bolster a gilded past.

LGBTQ film festivals continue to be vital sites for the circulation of queer culture, written off as wastelands of assimilationist rhetoric at critics' peril. These spaces are still navigated by queer artists from disadvantaged populations who are having to find new languages and strategies to respond to both pre-existing barriers obstructing queer artistry in a normative world, and new ones resultant of gay capitalism and homonormativity. In terms of the workers mounting LGBTQ film festivals, Skadi Loist points out the insecure and volatile working conditions, few salaried staff members, and over-reliance on intern and volunteer workforces amounts to a state of precariousness quite different from the image of shiny corporate stability that often follows festivals like Outfest ("Precarious cultural work," 268–269). In *Business, Not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market* (2004), Katherine Sender warns that a fixation on the corrupting power of assimilationist media discredits the abilities of contemporary LGBTQ audiences to interpret media on their own terms. She writes:

> Concerns about the assimilationist impulses of gay marketing allow little space for a campy interpretation of consumer culture that allows gays and lesbians to aggressively reappropriate stereotypes and to prevent normative sexual roles. The assimilationist critique cannot accommodate the myriad ways in which GLBT-identified people negotiate the specificities of their desires, incomes, and habitus in part through their consumption (235).

Sender locates potential in the queer spectator's ability to negotiate camp, nuance, and difference even from media most insistent on assimilationist and homonormative incarnations of LGBTQ identity. Film festival spaces, which hinge on the spontaneity of a live event, promote this potential that desires to override a sense of diluted, expired cultural production.

Sender also finds in queer critiques of allegedly assimilationist media a "lament… [of the] demise of a marginalized gay taste elite," one she contextualizes as predominantly male and financially prosperous (231). Such fantasies of "the queer old days" in media discourses are also often racialized as white. The nostalgia for LGBTQ film festivals before a de-radicalized "gay pragmatist" moment upholds scrutiny on the present that is essential, one frequently proven necessary in the more dispiritingly assimilationist media texts that find their way to the LGBTQ film festival circuit. But this nostalgia is an imperfect critical tool in its treasuring a queer cultural moment heavily identified with a specific generation of cis white queer urbane men in the 1980s–1990s.[71] These power structures of identity cut across both "radical" and "assimilationist" media publics; the radical is not immune simply by virtue of its political outlook. Nostalgia is an emotional structure capacious enough to hold both motivations.

"Working through" this nostalgia in a negotiated media network loosens the hold of a gilded age frequently viewed uncritically, with the contemporary LGBTQ film festival a space

[71] I reiterate "urbane" throughout my discussion of LGBTQ film festival nostalgia as a reference to the real politics of urban vs rural space embedded in the construction of LGBTQ popular culture, favoring urban centers as the base of (particularly gay male) social life. As LGBTQ film festivals are frequently found in major cities, such as Outfest in Los Angeles, this is a relevant factor in the culture of major LGBTQ film festivals. The disconnects between urban and rural queers are explored further in sources such as *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* by Scott Herring (2010) and *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* by Nadine Hubbs (2014).

capable of productively inhabiting old emotions. Thomas Elsaesser theorizes film festivals as a "world body" of different national cinemas intermingling and communicating almost in a kind of diplomatic exchange (88). Similarly, I argue LGBTQ film festivals can be a kind of staging ground for the negotiation of different narratives of queer community. While mundane assimilationist media is a reality, equally so is the complexity of the film festival ecosystem in forging new meanings out of the exchange and networking of mixed emotions.

5.3 Affect in Film Festival Networks

The kind of notoriously emotional and passionate queer film festival audiences that emanate from this nostalgic 1980s-1990s ideal are frequently described in terms of their networked emotional energy. This fuels a powerful nostalgia for radical, revolutionary queer cinema, best traced back to B. Ruby Rich's reportage circle 1992 celebrating the arrival of emergent experimentally inclined creative talent welcomed within an energetic, enthusiastic film festival atmosphere. B. Ruby Rich's initial pieces on New Queer Cinema and queer film festival cultures in the early 1990s are not only foundational texts of this nostalgia, but they also offer early models on how to analyze an affective media network in the context of a film festival. Initially, in the article "A Queer Sensation" in *The Village Voice* in 1992, then re-printed under the headline "The New Queer Cinema" in *Sight & Sound,* Rich coined the name "New Queer Cinema" to identify a cluster of avant-garde films by the likes of Derek Jarman, Todd Haynes, Sadie Benning, Gregg Araki, and others that used performative and experimental methods to explore queer rage and rebellion, most particularly in the light of the HIV/AIDS crisis. Rich later opined in 2013 that the NQC moniker had been a useful "tagline" in the "production, financing, festival play [and] distribution" of queer filmmaking (xx). In the article, Rich brackets her ideas into sections on-the-ground at specific festivals ("Dateline: Toronto," Dateline: Amsterdam"),

none of them LGBTQ-specific film festivals, but all decidedly *made queer* by the bold spirit infusing their LGBTQ programming (1992, 32). Rich's article captures festival excitement with the intensity of a "here and now" first-person reporting, suggesting a temporal and spatial position of queer innovation and oppositional art fizzling like a firecracker in its 1992 present, and inevitably receding further and further into the past with each new (re-)reading. Frequently read in university classrooms and encapsulating for many what the early 1990s LGBTQ festival film was, Rich's article is now a shimmering historical record emphasizing a then-new electric queerness ready to take over the world, detached from filmic texts specifically and smoldering as an energy, an affective charge. You just had to be *there, then,* at Sundance in 1992 to *feel* it.

Feeling the energy in the air at Sundance 1992, a great queer reckoning with settled cinematic forms, was to be immersed in an embodied affect of excitement and wonder. It hit the festival attendees like Rich as a unique and potent power. But as a feeling tied to social constructions of gender and sexuality, it is equally a production of discursive framing, a fact that does nothing to dilute its sensory power. To return to the framing of affect introduced in the start of this dissertation, the allure of New Queer Cinema as a hyped festival experience is a great example of what Susanna Paasonen would term an "affective formation." Paasonen writes that affective formations "are cognitive inasmuch as they are discursive. They are experienced as visceral intensities and contingent bodily states, but they equally come about as objects of reflection and concern in cultural and social analyses" (12). New Queer Cinema is an affective media network that ties together "intensities" with a larger socio-political context in service of forming one desiring aggregate. In creating this network in her article, Rich moves back and forth between the press coverage, the text of the films, the organization of panels and Q+As, all resilient and rowdy moments of fabulous queer insistence, and in doing so produces a map of

nodes that together facilitate affect. This is an affective media network not specifically named by Rich, who presents the festival as an organic wealth of queer creativity and potential. But reading Rich's formation as an affective media network, we can think of this as a deliberate activation of queer emotional economies that Rich is translating into words and then becoming part of herself, published in *Sight & Sound* in 1992 and spreading the gospel of New Queer Cinema to a wide readership. Rich's article is part of the cluster of media texts propagating the immense nostalgia for the 1990s in the LGBTQ film festival circuit, but it also reveals a central instrument that can read the work of queer affect still present in film festivals, even if a set of queer affects thoroughly modified to meet the cultural moment of Outfest in the mid-twenty-first century. If the discursive construction of "New Queer Cinema" in the 1990s was an affective media network of textual satellites moving in basically the same direction, towards radical re-invention and pride, I deploy the concept of affective media network here to analyze the more mixed feelings of contemporary LGBTQ film festivals, feelings negotiated amongst an ambivalent network.

When much of the existing scholarly literature on film festivals emphasizes industrial and historical contexts, I join recent work by Felicia Chan and Jonathan Petrychyn in foregrounding affect as a central component of the cultural work of film festivals, bringing in Rich's work as an under-recognized predecessor. Affect theory is at once omnipresent in film festival scholarship yet invisible, the intangible entities of emotion and sensation an understood quantity in the "buzz" and circulation of film festival economies, but rarely imagined as a proper research subject. Daniel Dayan notes the transformative qualities of the film festival environment, writing "the particular atmosphere of the festival transforms forms of viewing" much to the displeasure of film distributors, who buy a festival smash hit only to find it met with disinterest in traditional

theatrical release (50). The film festival is quite inseparable from its contexts of affective attachment, and the things emotions do to bind value to experience.

Diane Burgess echoes this focus in her attempt to evaluate "buzz" as a significant value within the film festival environment. Defining buzz as "ephemeral value creation," Burgess notes the difficulties in precisely measuring or quantifying buzz, a concept that has significant commercial currency in the ongoing industrial use of the film festival as an exhibition form, even as it's rooted in the vague qualities of "presence, energy, and communal experience" (230). Film festival spaces have often been sought after for their intangibility. Bill Nichols' 1994 essay "Global Image Consumption in the Age of Late Capitalism," foundational for a lot of subsequent film festival studies, imagines film festivals as "a return to aura" in the terms of Walter Benjamin, objecting to the ongoing digitization of the cinematic marketplace with an analog synchronization of time and space in viewing that "simulates the aura of authenticity and tradition" in the grandeur of a film's festival premiere (41). Burgess imagines intangible sensation in film festival spaces as factors in a framework of commercial valuation, while Nichols senses a simulation of aura that desirously lures in the film festival attendee, though neither uses the word "affect" in describing these sensory appeals. The discourse of affect theory has a lot to bring to film festival studies, as much of film festival studies seems to gesture towards the affective even when not specifically named.

The creation of ephemeral value is a central concern to affect studies, but it is equally essential in studies of LGBTQ worlds, where whispered or erased histories may be all that exists as evidence of queer lives. As José Esteban Muñoz describes:

> Queerness is often transmitted covertly. This has everything to do with the fact that leaving too much of a trace has often meant that the queer subject has left herself open for attack. Instead of being clearly available as visible evidence, queerness has instead

> existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere– while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility.

In "direct defiance to calls for a return to real evidence," scholarly approaches recognizing the impact of the ephemeral "grant entrance and access to those who have been locked out of official histories" (6). As I discussed in my second chapter on public sex cultures, the opacity of more indirect strategies of communication may even be a desired preference. As Nicholas de Villiers explains in *Opacity and the Closet* (2012), queer people often display disillusionment with the "post-Stonewall gay politics" that empowered "purity of communication whereby a fixed meaning is carried smoothly from sender to receiver, preferring the closure of denotation" to "the perpetual play of connotation" (21). This blurred communication, resistant against dominant codes emphasizing the clear and evidentiary, resonates with the same pull of nostalgia for 1980s-1990s LGBTQ film festival circuits that was less integrated to broader systems of entertainment capitalism, and thereby less visible to the mainstream. In this created binary within queer spaces between the clear/evidential and the opaque/ephemeral, clarity is frequently associated with assimilationist definitions of gender and sexuality, creating opacity as its queerer opposite. Antoine Damiens brings studies of the queer ephemeral and film festivals together out of this precise lineage of queer scholarly imagination, imaging his contribution to both the studies of fleeting live events and queer lives on the peripheries as "a justice project dedicated to ephemeral festivals and traces in the archives" (236).

All of this suggests the natural presence of affect theory in film festival studies, attending to the capacity of film festivals to facilitate meaning-making in abstract and ephemeral languages outside of stricter conditions of evidentiary existence. One might even say the strategic goal of film festivals is to produce this spread of energy that can then be mapped onto films and the

industry at large. Framing affect as constructed through media networks, the presence of two or more nodes in a chain of transmitted affect a critical factor in creating negotiated meaning, I am calling on another theoretical concept of heavy use and significance to film festival studies, that of "the network." Marijke de Valck, in the first major monograph on film festivals *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia* (2007) utilizes actor-network theory (ANT) to analyze how power flows through the film festival circuit and wields notable industrial significance. While it is outside of the reach of this study to dive more thoroughly into the application of actor-network theory to film festival studies, de Valck's description of ANT showcases the film festival as a system well-suited to affect theory's focus. She writes:

> it [ANT] focuses on processes as circulating entities, on movements and interactions between various entities that are produced within these relations. For film festivals, this idea of mobile agency is very instructive because it elevates the necessity of distinguishing between the 'festival' as abstract super-structure and various types of visitors and events as carriers of change (34).

De Valck's framing of the film festival as network reinforces its status as a space of transformation and distributed agencies collected together. Attending to the affective contexts of these networked nodes brings forth the critical work of feeling in the circulation of the film festival's many meanings. Affective media networks are a critical mechanism for gesturing towards the contested life of emotional meaning in the film festival ecosystem, and no networked symbol is more strikingly associated with LGBTQ media publics than the rainbow.

5.4 The Rainbow

The 2019 Outfest Film Festival in was held in the TCL Chinese Theatre 6, the re-branded name of the historic Grauman's Chinese Theatre, which was purchased by the Chinese electronics company TCL Technology in 2013. This meant that Outfest was held in the public

competition of a functioning movie theater, playing the new releases of the moment along with the festival's 2019 LGBTQ programming. This was quite a change from the festival's primary 2018 location, the headquarters of the Directors Guild of America (DGA) on Sunset Boulevard. Outfest's rental of the entire first floor of the DGA building and its accompanying screening rooms deferred a certain amount of industry prestige onto the location, as well as a privacy impossible in the TCL Chinese Theatre 6. DGA building renovations led Outfest to seek a new home for 2019, one that in its public nature demanded the purposeful intention of ticket-holders to weave around the general crowds to get to LGBTQ media. As a result, Outfest's capacity to announce itself as specifically queer, while in a contentious public space still serving a general customer, became a matter of more specific design intention than it had been in 2018. In these conditions, Outfest's spatial layout and advertising was tasked with making "pride" a visibly distinguishable experience.

If Outfest's unique construction of "pride" was the topic that dominated much of my trip to the 2019 festival, this was traceable in a common iconography of LGBTQ pride festivals: the rainbow. Outfest's rainbow, as an affective media network, came to signify a "pride" not smoothly inspirational, tangled across different satellites with their own relationships to LGBTQ past and identity. The rainbow is a widely disseminated image in LGBTQ visual cultures, used to affirm pride in one's gender and sexual identity, and in the diversity of the LGBTQ community. Nonetheless, the rainbow as a graphic illustration of LGBTQ pride is disputed, and revisions and mutations of the rainbow flag have proliferated. Originating in Philadelphia in 2017, when black and brown stripes were added to the traditional red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple, the Philly Pride Flag aimed to recognize diversities of race and ethnicity in the LGBTQ community and was officially adopted by the city government. In 2018, artist Daniel Quasar designed the

Progress Pride Flag, which modified the original rainbow to include a triangle on the left side of black and brown stripes, following the Philly Pride Flag, and stripes in light blue, pink, and white, drawing on the colors of the existing Trans Pride Flag designed by Monica Helms (Lang). Like the Trans Pride Flag, specific pride flags for individual identities within the LGBTQ umbrella (such as lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, and intersex) have existed over the movement's history, amongst many others dedicated to more niche community identifications (such as bears and BDSM). The iconicity of the rainbow flag is therefore already a workable semiotic tool, continually negotiated and re-negotiated in LGBTQ spaces. As it is deployed symbolically throughout the different sites of Outfest, an affective media network emerges that is engaged in the same work of complicating meaning.

A number of rainbows caught my eye at Outfest 2019. Each ticket, even those procured online, was stamped with the 2019 logo of an unfurling, chaotic mass of color strands. By my count, the 2019 festival program included 24 distinct rainbow illustrations, whether in the form of a film screenshot, created graphic, or advertisement. None, however, was as immediately eye-catching as a dramatic structure provided by 2019's "Grand Sponsor" of the festival, AT&T, positioned in the center of all the theaters of the TCL Chinese Theatre 6 (Figures 5.3–5.4). A sort of deconstructed rainbow, the structure bore the arched shape


Figure 5.3 – The AT&T Rainbow Arch (photo by author at Outfest 2019).

of the rainbow but furnished with a white exterior containing diverse colors inside the arch as a variety of kitschy fringes in blue, silver, orange, green, and purple. Across from the fringes was a wall bearing a floor-to-ceiling mirror. The ceiling of the arch included a variety of disco balls, a signifier suggestive of the 1970s, a time period frequently mythologized in American queer male cultures as pre-AIDS idealism and indulgence. The structure was accompanied by a smiling AT&T representative eager to evidence the good work the company has done in the name of LGBTQ solidarity, a human stamp of corporate attachment for an object that curiously did not bear the AT&T logo itself. AT&T did however claim the second page of the Outfest program, with a page-length advertisement proclaiming "Proud Ally Since 1975," repeating again the association with the 1970s in AT&T's corporate benevolence. The representative was also there to hand out markers, inviting attendees to enjoy, in a naughty violation of public politesse, the freedom to draw on the arch and leave personal messages at their will. Otherwise, this object was uniquely void of explication or elaboration, the arch's preponderance of white negative space redolent of the prevailing aesthetics of the tech industry: glossy, smooth, streamlined, commercial, and above all else new. It's a reminder of AT&T's participation in a technological economy dominated by a

Figure 5.4 – The AT&T Rainbow Arch (photo by author at Outfest 2019).

kind of Silicon Valley style, here reaching out to include an LGBTQ film festival in a system of competitive innovation.

Looking into the mirror you catch the reflection of the cheaply-made rainbow fringe, a flimsy decoration granted a spot of ceremonial significance. The rainbow is clunky, and embarrassing. It gestures at "fun" and "camp" in the most cringe-worthy and inelegant of ways. It is akin to a pride float sponsored by a prominent bank, reaching out haphazardly to the LGBTQ community in a vague shrug as if to ask "Is this what queers like?" The arch awkward to navigate, placed in an atrium with no clear directionality or purpose beyond a vague photo opportunity. Objects like the AT&T Rainbow arch can be uniquely dispiriting to queer people seeing their culture reflected through the lens of such lazily impersonal commodification. Alexandra Chasin discusses a similar installation in *Selling Out: The Gay & Lesbian Movement Goes to Market* (2000). Reflecting on "Pink Umbrellas: An Absolut Remembrance," Chasin describes a creation of 500 pink umbrellas designed as an AIDS memorial by the vodka company Absolut. Any good intentions on the company's part were marred by the disjunctive mismatch of community grief and advertising display, the company's name front and center in a manner "desacralizing its memorial function" (Chasin 197).

This AT&T photo opportunity did "work," however: a casual scan of Instagram using the hashtag "#outfest2019" shows many selfies taken underneath the arch amidst the rainbow fringe, posts still online at the time of this writing. The rainbow arch as part of the experiential affective web of Outfest 2019 was an attempt by the organizers, in concert with corporate sponsorship, to erect an edifice that can queerly announce "pride" in a contested space. But so too did the arch "work" in producing "cringe," an emotion of embarrassment that similarly reaches out for an audience, seeking shared understanding of a thoroughly insufficient representation. While not

traditionally thought of as wholly "pleasurable," it still performs a function within an affective media network, here as a kind of ballast for other satellites to bounce off. If the rainbow is a cringe in one instance, it speaks to other emotional contexts elsewhere, contributing to an overall queer ambivalence.

Discursively rendering "pride" material and tangible is a theme of Thomas R. Dunn's book *Queerly Remembered: Rhetorics for Representing the GLBTQ Past* (2016), particularly as it applies to the art of what he calls "queer monumentality." Dunn defines queer monumentality as "an ongoing and evolving assortment of efforts by GLBTQ people, institutions, and communities to give their shared pasts a weightiness, timelessness, and grandeur in order to activate collective power and effect social change" (21). [72] Dunn's study traces efforts at queer monumentality from the traditional monuments and statues to tributes without solid material form, such as in-community customs and traditions. Dunn defines a dichotomy between "monumental" memory strategies, aimed at paying respect to LGBTQ histories in solid and state-supported avenues, and "tactical/ephemeral" memory strategies, histories communicated by queer people to other queers that root queer remembering in more abstract collection, gossip, rumor, and community folklore, favoring inter-community languages rather than public-facing ones. At the end of his book, Dunn picks a side between the two, emphasizing the public good and far reach monumental efforts can have over the limited in-community spread of tactical/ephemeral remembering. He adds that the role of tactical/ephemeral memory in the contemporary moment should be that of a "check" on the limitations of state-sponsored remembrance.

[72] Dunn's book uses the acronym 'GLBTQ 'instead of the more commonly-use 'LGBTQ" 'to reflect the historical emergence" of the different identity-terms, itself a problematic gesture suggesting a historiographic point of view worth interrogating (note 12, pages 191 - 192)

Although Dunn's politics are different from my own, as I lack his confidence in state-sponsored commemorations of LGBTQ history, particularly when it comes to the experiences of disadvantaged queers within the LGBTQ community, his paradigm is instructive for the challenges facing LGBTQ historiography, and the temptations that pull it in opposing directions. The desire to endow LGBTQ pasts with "a weightiness, timelessness, and grandeur" by means of large-scale efforts collaborating with powerful legal, governmental, and economic authorities cuts against the historical and emotional investments previously mentioned that desire fleeting and ephemeral modes of queer signification. Despite clear communication's supposed claim to safe and accessible community, queer connection forged through more abstract languages, such as affect, is frequently a source of great pleasure and world-making, inherited from the strategies of queer publics relegated to the margins of society, speaking tacitly with purpose.

The monumental, with its clear mass address, and the ephemeral, speaking more covertly to queer audiences, operate as different aesthetic principles that are formative in the work of media institutions reaching out to divergent publics. Joshua Gamson ponders these precise tensions in his early study of LGBTQ film festivals (1996). Comparing the New York Lesbian and Gay Film Festival against the coterminous NYC Mix Festival, Gamson analyzes the former's clear centering of lesbian and gay identities against the latter's embrace of more gender-fluid definitions and abstracted lines of gender and sexuality. Both approaches are political, but envision different kinds of queer publics, and manifest the film festival as a representation of this desired public. If we were to read the AT&T rainbow arch as one or the other, clear or opaque, it clearly favors Dunn's description of the queer monumental: a kind of blunt celebratory capitalism possessing queer intent, material weighted-ness, and establishment tethering in the form of a corporate sponsorship, reminding customers that they are seen as such in their full

diversity.[73] But AT&T's installation is just one rainbow among many. Rather than classifying entire festivals through Dunn's dichotomy of monumental/ephemeral, an analysis largely pursued by Gamson's earlier work, we can view clear and opaque as aesthetic heuristics for individual satellites (themselves often operating with conflict and mixed messaging), formed in competition with others in an affective media network. After taking in the corporate rainbow, being not in and of it but *over it* to borrow a phrase from Judy Garland, I brought my feelings of resistant cringe to the screening room just beyond the arch to see the documentary *State of Pride.*

State of Pride is a documentary by the established documentarian team Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman (*Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt, The Celluloid Closet*) in collaboration with YouTuber Raymond Braun who serves as the film's host, itself a kind of point of exchange between old and new media. Like the rainbow arch outside in the foyer, many rainbows adorn the sites of this documentary in different shapes and configurations: t-shirts, banners, flags, and all the accoutrements of a typical pride festival. *State of Pride* looks at four different pride festivals (in Washington, DC; Tuscaloosa, Alabama; San Francisco, California; and Salt Lake City, Utah) to document the different experiences of queer public gathering and interview LGBTQ locals for their views on the festival. A warm empathy and enthusiasm, eager to celebrate the affirmative spirit of pride festivals, floods the film. But it's not without a slight tenor of ambivalence suggesting the presence of mixed feelings.

State of Pride begins beneath an enormous rainbow tarp, the total expanse invisible as we occupy each subsequent stripe of color. Early on in the film, Braun identifies the guiding question of his exploration of pride: "What does pride mean to young people today?" Braun,

[73] One of Dunn's main case studies, a Toronto statue of early 1800s Canadian magistrate Alexander Wood who was embroiled in a gay sex scandal, is frequently graffitied by its Toronto community with homoerotic images, which Dunn reads as a less respectability-minded retort to the statue's classicism. AT&T's offering of marker 'graffiti 'to Outfest attendees for its rainbow arch is a similar idea, though the very fact that its graffiti is 'permitted 'limits its role as any kind of check or protest on the monumental.

thirty years old in 2019, is broadly a young person, at least compared to his collaborators, Friedman's career with LGBTQ documentary dating back to *Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt* in 1989, and Epstein's to *Word is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* in 1977. Nonetheless, Braun's focus appears to be on an even younger generation than his own, *State of Pride* juggling three generational orientations between subject, host, and filmmakers. This multi-temporality conjures moments of disconnection, such as when the film displays footage of pop star Troye Sivan performing at Washington D.C. Pride moments after a montage speedily recounting both U.S. pride's origins in the Stonewall Riot, and the mass resistance and the determination of ACT UP during the HIV/AIDS crisis. Sivan's adoring crowd participates in a back-and-forth chant: "What do we want?" "TROYE!" "When do we want it?" "NOW!". Suggesting a temporal movement from concrete activism to fawning pop star adoration, the sequence lends *State of Pride* a prickly undercurrent of regret, either for the mass commodification of LGBTQ pride in line with an entertainment industry economy, the diluted radicalism of younger generations, or both. And it's hard not to attribute this moment of irony to Epstein and Freidman, when Braun is shown enthusiastically shouting along.

State of Pride hosts queer ambivalence. Amidst the film's overall hearty embrace of pride festivals as zones of self-affirmation and group togetherness, moments of dissent stand out. A young Black man comments on the segregated nature of Washington D.C.'s respective pride festivals. In Tuscaloosa, a middle-aged trans woman notes that pride festivals, at both the local and national levels, aren't centered around trans lives. In the San Francisco section of the film, comments on intra-LGBTQ divisions increase, and simultaneous events happening under the umbrella of San Francisco Pride, such as the Trans March and the Dyke March, are explored. While these voices don't echo the same critique of commodification and assimilation that

subverts the Troye Sivan concert, and are not as rooted in nostalgia, they equally express discontent and a personal distancing from the documentary's utopianism. Overall *State of Pride*'s treatment of LGBTQ pride festivals is loving and enthusiastic, with ambivalent feelings left hanging without resolution.[74]

In contrast to its title *State of Pride,* which implies a bellwether assessment of LGBTQ pride festivals, the documentary is afraid to assess too critically. Seemingly aware of its nature as an event at an LGBTQ film festival (and one scheduled shortly after pride month), *State of Pride* is engaged in affective mediation of its own, balancing critique with celebration. The film reiterates the eternal importance of commemorating queer history and valuing queer celebration, particularly in suburban and rural contexts far flung from major metropolitan centers, and for people still beginning to form non-normative gender and sexual identities, for whom the closet is always a punishing construct, regardless of when and where. However, the film's subtle looks at the cracks and crevices of a perfect pride compel attention. If the AT&T rainbow arch directed the festivalgoer to a cheesy embrace of a commodified present, *State of Pride*'s affective positionality affirms a community unity and pride as it looks back towards the past suggestively, in ambivalent unease.

State of Pride was accompanied by a short film advertising an online LGBTQ history initiative put on by New York City's LGBTQ Community Center, the National Park Service, and Google, called *Stonewall Forever.* In both the film and the online exhibit, the Google branding is hidden from view unless you specifically seek out the website's backers, in contrast to AT&T's rainbow arch which dispensed with a logo but included an on-the-ground employee. The

[74] The closest *State of Pride* comes to addressing and reforming systematic tensions regarding LGBTQ pride festivals and coalitional safety/representation is in the words of SF Pride Community Grand Marshall Kin Folkz, interviewed by Braun in the film. Folkz expresses interest in reorganizing Pride leadership "from the margins," and insists on the importance of multiple Pride events celebrating different LGBTQ identities.

Figure 5.5 – The homepage interface of Stonewall Forever (screenshot taken 1/26/24).

Stonewall Forever online exhibit is another deconstructed rainbow, this one resembling a large column of rainbow-colored crystals digitally inserted into a 3D interactive map of Christopher Park, an iconic location for 1960s and 70s gay activism, complete with George Segal's gay liberation sculptures visible in the background (Figure 5.5). The crystals seem to float, hover, and change direction more abruptly with the move of your cursor across a computer screen. Many of the crystals if clicked on unfurl a story related to the history of the Stonewall Riot and pioneers of the early LGBTQ rights movement. Users may also inscribe personal messages on one of the many floating crystals. Some include photographs of romantic couples. With *Stonewall Forever* advertising at a film festival, an event celebrating the most antique of medias, online media is further merged into the milieu of Outfest, in a temporal asynchrony of different forms.

Unlike the AT&T rainbow arch, *Stonewall Forever* is purely digital, with no tangible quality giving it weight or unavoidable disclosure in the physical world. Customers attending the TCL Chinese Theatre 6 with no knowledge of Outfest are forced to reckon with the material presence of the rainbow arch, while the *Stonewall Forever* monument can only be found online. Its very composition, as the aggregate of a million floating rainbow crystals, symbolizes a diversification of LGBTQ history that is not containable into one clear monument. This abstract rainbow suggests an ephemeral orientation to history, as opposite to Dunn's outlined monumentality: queer history as a pathway of individual crystals, localized around spaces of specific community importance. Yet, like the AT&T rainbow arch, it also depends on a "weightiness" lent by a mainstream corporate anchor, in this case, Google. Google's corporate sponsorship, perhaps subtler than AT&T's, feels almost self-conscious of the discursive baggage of being the mainstream financial institution backing a LGBTQ heritage project; the restrained, nearly invisible corporate insignia reads as a badge of enlightened corporate-citizenship. Outfest's media rainbows defy a strict binary of radical vs incorporative or monumental vs ephemeral, such distinctions more guiding heuristics rather than binary categories of material remembering.

These three satellites in my affective media network at Outfest made me feel different ways about the rainbow. Encountering these three sites– AT&T's rainbow arch, *State of Pride,* and *Stonewall Forever*– in the experience of Outfest is to encounter a triangulation of distinct relationships to LGBTQ history, and different orientations to LGBTQ presents, dictated through the flow and transmission of feeling, producing a state of queer ambivalence. *State of Pride* can't avoid looking back nostalgically, AT&T institutes a frivolous monumental present of corporate dystopia, and *Stonewall Forever* attempts to perhaps conjoin the two: re-interpreting

"monument" in a sincere act of public outreach and acknowledging the irreconcilable multifaceted-ness of queer pasts. Outfest can't be assigned to one of these positions; rather; it's quite important that it is understood to be all of them. These different nodes, worked through in the experience of attending the festival, are a network of interlocking LGBTQ historio-affective experiences, made all the more intense by the presence of the others. The "emptiness" of the AT&T Rainbow arch is a Trojan horse– the apparent homonormative mundanity a cover over the complex and contrary affects actually being exchanged in the festival environment. The satellites of an affective media network are divergent but weave together negotiated meaning, and in true film festival fashion, depend on a here-and-now presence and the individuality of one's own experience.

5.5 The Line

The first time I visited Outfest, I was immediately struck by the mass of signage and velvet line dividers sectioning off the wide atrium of the DGA building into separate compartments, each with a related line of waiting attendees. The film festival experience is often one of waiting in lines, nebulous time spent in anticipation of a new event that will, in theory, give meaning to the time that has just been spent. But with Outfest specifically the *variety* of lines surprised me, each conveying levels of festival membership, ticket prestige, and attendee status. Large signs were hung overhead with

Figure 5.6 – Line Signposts at Outfest 2018 (photo by author at Outfest 2018).

almost menacing silent authority, announcing what line the trembling souls beneath them were doomed to be (Figure 5.6). At Outfest, I identified as a single ticket purchaser, bereft of any concrete membership clan name or identity, and was thus sent to my designated space behind the tiers of exclusivity. For both the 2018 and 2019 festivals, Outfest's membership levels, with accompanying ticket prices and separate lines, were arranged hierarchically in the model of a film set, ascending up in levels: Crew, Gaffer, Assistant Director, Director, Producer, Executive Producer, Studio Executive, Mogul, and Legend, the last a $10,000 membership level including many VIP events and privileges throughout the festival. The festival was largely an experience of different kinds of leveling and stratification, and the fearsome hierarchy implied in the film set terminology– amidst a real-world location already defined by entertainment industry ambition– literalized it. While it would be an overstatement to suggest the facilitation of multiple categories of commodity purchasing itself instituted a felt power imbalance, in a system of exchanged affects within the media public of Outfest, stratifying and grouping, with their spatial dimensionality, have a felt presence in the embodied experience of a festival. Waiting in lines at Outfest, as benign as it may appear, forces another kind of consciousness of group assembly that inflames and picks at lingering tensions in LGBTQ cultures writ large, and their attendant power imbalances.

Erin Hanna, in her study of the mammoth annual entertainment convention Comic-Con, considers waiting in lines as part of the cumulative image of capitalistic power media industries demonstrate in the environment of a media event. Describing the infamously long lines at major Comic-Con panels and other events, Hanna writes that "the prominence and proliferation of lines at Comic-Con make the *work* of being a consumer significantly more visible" (67). Having the longest line becomes a new point of pride for competing comic book franchises. Hanna argues

that lines and waiting becomes discursively weighted, tethered to imaginary competitive economies of buzz and hype. But looking at lines at Outfest suggests something different than Comic-Con's visual demonstration of popularity. For a media event premised around the celebration and promotion of identity-specific media, lines can quickly connect to visual judgments of identity that draw out and accentuate cultural positioning. In this way lines, and the associated time waiting, also require lingering in liminal scrutiny within a disciplined location, a suggestive idea for queer histories and cultures, where "passing" and the fear of being seen by the wrong eyes are notable tension points.

In her classic memoir *A Restricted Country* (1987), Joan Nestle addresses the notion of a line as powerful semiotic transmission ground in queer cultural history. Writing about a bar frequented by lesbian women in 1950s New York City called The Sea Colony, Nestle recounts the practice of forbidding more than one woman to enter the restroom at a time. Nestle writes in "The Bathroom Line":

> The line awaited all of us every night, and we developed a line act. We joked, we cruised, we commented on the length of time one of us took, we made special pleas to allow hot-and-heavy lovers in together, knowing full well that our lady would not permit it. I stood, a femme, loving the women on either side of me, loving my comrades for their style, the power of their stance, the hair hitting the collar, the thrown-out hip, the hand encircling the beer can. Our eyes played the line, subtle touches, gentle shyness weave under the blaring jokes, the music, the surveillance. We lived on that line; restricted and judged, we took deep breaths and played (39).

I read these words and feel gratitude for the hard-fought worlds of queer community that could develop under such pernicious circumstances, how the regulation of "lines" of many sorts took their toll as an undeniable forcing hand of queer cultural history. But Nestle indicates the existence of a "line act," and the potential for performative expression against constraints that is its own kind of world-building, signaling exception and divergence that can extend throughout the line in a sisterhood. This is an ephemeral tradition of world-making, similar to the discreet and opaque practices valorized in resistance to monumental public memory.

Though OutFest's lines are different in most ways conceivable (for starters, the bathrooms are absolutely mobbed in-between showtimes), as an attendee I approached them expecting the bloom of affective community. Being "out in public," even for those long out of the closet, even for the city of Los Angeles, carries an almost vestigial thrill. But whether it's the endless division, the chaotic pace of life, or the absence of a unifying danger, a jolt of queer camaraderie in the line was hard to find. Felicia Chan describes the emotional experience of film festivals, when one is trying to see numerous films, as frequently a lonely one, a "solitary" experience of "compressed encounters" where "the pressure of having to rush from venue to venue does not always make for good social interaction" (99). I wondered if this was the emotional block that created a rift between the joy of organizing as queer-in-public, versus lonely residency in a line waiting for the next show. I concluded the striving for queer community was a fundamental emotion of the LGBTQ film festival space, searching hopefully for the glimmer of desire across the malaise that threatened to confirm critics of LGBTQ film festival's most paranoid assertions.

One film displayed the lively line fantasy I was having trouble finding. Nestle's "The Bathroom Line" appeared at Outfest 2018, sort of, in a mutated capacity, as the short film *The*

Toilet Line playing in a compendium titled "Crazy, Kinky, Cool," showcasing the best in queer women's erotic filmmaking. This played in the second auditorium of the DGA building in the afternoon of Friday, July 20th, 2018, a day I would later learn was reserved for cinema about queer women and women-identifying filmmakers. Sitting in the theater, I overheard a woman speaking casually about the festival and how it was harder to find the women's erotic short films compendium this year due to the vague name of the program. Another woman nearby speculated that this was a specific programming decision, settling on a subtler name when the previous year's screening of erotic lesbian films had been overrun by a rowdy straight cis male audience. This fear demonstrated the continuing difficulties of gathering as queer in public space, here specifically as queer women, when cinema celebrating queer female sexuality can be corrupted in its exhibition by patriarchal interlopers.

The Toilet Line (dir. Goodyn Green), the most explicitly and literally sexual of the six films in the program, portrays two women (played by adult media performers Jasko Fide and Ze Royal) at a crowded and intense lesbian club, bathed in neon lights, outfitted in chains and leather, who find a silent but rigorous chemistry with one another while waiting in line for the bathroom. The two are *not* barred from entering at the same time. Twelve minutes of hardcore lesbian sex ensue, the tense cohabitation of the literally pornographic and the somehow-not, acceptably "erotic" queer cinema, notably dividing the audience at my screening, as quiet uncomfortable giggling increased over the film's running time. The aggregate emotion of this screening public was tense and awkward in the discovery of yet another "line," this time suggesting which work was fit for film festival audiences and which was not.

Surprised at hearing this was part of an all-woman day in programming day as I had tickets that night for a film directed by and about queer men, I learned later that Outfest's

advertising of an all-woman lineup was limited to their primary festival venue, the DGA building, where women-made content for-women did dominate the day. But at Outfest's other venue, the impressive Ford Ampitheatre in the Hollywood Hills, the men retreated into the Santa Monica mountains for *Postcards from London* (dir. Steve McLean)*,* a nostalgia-laden, woozily over-styled portrait of fine art-obsessed male sex workers in London's Soho. I started the day amongst a near exclusively woman-identifying crowd and moved to a near exclusively male-identifying one at the Ford. Experiences like my Friday screenings illustrated the massive stratification in Outfest's flows of audience traffic, here not defined by membership levels or ticket tiers but by identity categories. And while seeing one's own story on screen is an understandable value for all queer identities, the *Postcards from London* screening's sneaking loophole, hosting a group of queer men up in the mountains while the festival's ground level locations advertised a day devoted to queer women's media, evidenced a powerful breach in viewing patterns that might as well have been entirely separate festivals.

The lines governing Outfest were beginning to feel claustrophobic, emphasizing a directional flow matching identity to festival screening traffic. Watching *Postcards from London*, I felt uniquely hailed as a festival spectator, a queer man surrounded by other queer men. A predominantly white crowd, the racialized dimensions of Outfest's audience, at least in this one screening, were reflected up on screen. *Postcards from London* follows a young male sex worker, Jim (Harris Dickinson) thrust into the world of a gang of young elite male escorts called "The Raconteurs," who offer sexual favors to older queer men primarily in the form of intellectual conversation and passion for high art. [75] The film is a tour of queer art history classics

[75] Harris Dickinson, a straight-identifying actor, was most famous at this point for Eliza Hittman's 2017 film *Beach Rats,* another sexually explicit film where he played a gay role. Straight-identifying male actors going "gay for pay" in queer roles holds a unique mystique in some corners of queer male media fandom, and this being part of Dickinson's early "brand" as an actor

like the works of Caravaggio and Pasolini, exploring a canon decidedly suited to gay aesthetes. One of the film's few non-white characters, an unnamed Black homeless man (played by Jerome Holder) roaming Soho nightlife, offers Jim a rare space for confession and even tenderness, grounded as a more sincere character in comparison to the fleeting charms of the Raconteurs. *Postcards from London* constructs an "in crowd" of clannish white queer men, while a Black queer character loiters around the periphery, hinting at a perhaps more "authentic" queer life, less based on restrictive in-community dynamics, and more about individual expression.

This was a structure I saw frequently repeated in Outfest's programming targeting white queer male audiences, in two other national contexts: at Outfest 2018, the Brazilian film *Hard Paint* (dirs. Marcio Reolon and Filipe Matzembacher), where a young closeted light-skinned queer man, successful as an erotic webcam performer, spurns the romantic attempts of a darker-skinned friend in favor of the increasingly aggressive and anonymous[76] viewers online, and at Outfest 2019 the Australian film *Sequin in a Blue Room* (dir. Samuel Van Grinsven), where a young closeted white gay man explores the world of anonymous sex parties and ignores the affections of a young Black man in favor of a more dangerously compelling white daddy figure. Ordinarily these culturally distinct films would not be read together for cumulative meaning, but their inclusion in Outfest's programming suggests a proximity that would craft an overarching narrative for the regular Outfest attendee. In all three cases, the films imagine a white gay social world that is alluring but ultimately dangerous, made of clannish dynamics and abuse, while a queer male character of color is lifted up as a potential savior, a "solution" to a community that's

suggests another desire built-in to this film's cultural reputation. Since *Postcards from London,* Dickinson's brand as a sex symbol, in sexually-focused films demanding his body-as-spectacle, has further cemented, with roles as a male model coerced into exchanging sex for survival on a deserted island in *Triangle of Sadness* (dir. Ruben Östlund, 2022) and as a professional wrestler alongside similar heartthrobs Zac Efron and Jeremy Allen White in *The Iron Claw* (dir. Sean Durkin, 2023).

[76] The faceless online viewers captivating Pedro (Shico Menegat)'s attentions are not deliberately racialized as white. Yet their association with capital, as the financial support for financially precarious Pedro, does enforce a dichotomy wherein they represent a dominant power structure that the darker-skinned friend does not.

grown too cultish. The films reaffirm white gay men as the center, as the subject of the text, forcing queer men of color into a symbolic cipher position that is dehumanizing even as the narrative paints it in a gilded light. Films targeting queer white men like these seem to sense a kind of expiration, calling out for a multifaceted diversity of experience even as they fail to properly contextualize it. Within isolated identity-specific viewing lanes, a system Outfest mostly upholds for tradition, yearning for something beyond those very restrictions creeps up as a subversive pull.

Lines as a system of control are a prominent visual in film festival environments, but in this space, I felt the line extrapolate as an embodied affect of separation, a semiotic awareness of the foreclosures of the present resultant from gay pragmatism. Kadji Amin writes that "it is contemporary queer normalization within the folds of neoliberalism that has ruined the present," finding in Muñoz's discourse of queer utopianism a more radical past that can save the present (185). The striving I felt for a more radical expansive queer community, at times exacerbated and frustrated by identity-specific programming lanes, is an affective media network spread across the many lines and systems of structured separation in the film festival space.

This messy circulation of queer affect desires transformation. Recent programming initiatives signify the festival's own recognition of this separation, and their various efforts to combat them, to re-shape the affective containers the festival deploys. In 2004, Outfest launched a sister festival, Outfest Fusion, dedicated specifically to the promotion and circulation of queer of color filmmaking, in response to criticisms of the overall whiteness of Outfest's programming and cultural output. Skadi Loist has criticized moves such as these– termed a diversification "programming strategy of addition"– as creating a situation in which the "mainstream" festival moves further and further away from diverse representation now that a separate outlet has been

established ("A Complicated Queerness," 164). Though Outfest has made a decent effort to maintain diverse racial and ethnic representation in their programming since the creation of Outfest Fusion, the latter festival's overall existence has still been debated. Roya Rastegar criticized Fusion as doomed-to-fail given Outfest's lack of overall support for their sister festival, budgeting "less than even one-tenth" of its overall finances to Fusion (493).

If the creation of additional spaces frequently runs into problematic terrain, Loist advocates for a queering of programming strategies that would bend lines and mix congregation, writing:

> In accordance with the political imperative put forward by the concept queer, one would want to create a truly inclusive and diverse counterpublic. That is, one where guys would not only go to 'boys' programmes' and queer women of colour would not (only) be hailed to go to a 'queer women of colour' programme. It would mean a public sphere where these and other groups meet between programmes and are not separated because certain programmes [are] only shown in certain venues (165).

Loist's suggestions point towards a queer festival organization that wouldn't organize through immediate identity categories, instead gesturing towards a larger queer counterpublic, sustaining the mission of queer film festivals *as queer* and avoiding the ossification of gay pragmatist politics. Outfest 2019 appeared to ambivalently split the difference on this issue, maintaining the theme of moderation and mediation between separate incarnations of LGBTQ assembly. Whereas previous iterations of the festival had organized short films principally according to identity ("Boys Shorts," "Girls Shorts," etc) Outfest 2019 retained those legacy programs while including a roster of additional short film programs based around thematic similarities of

narrative, each titled with pop music lyrics from the LGBTQ cultural canon. “Turn and Face the Strange,” in reference to David Bowie’s “Changes” highlighted queer experiments in different speculative genres. “I Will Survive,” in reference to Gloria Gaynor’s gay anthem, collected stories of endurance and rebellion, ranging from activist women outside an abortion clinic to a male dancer struggling with HIV/AIDS. “Take These Lies and Make Them True,” a lyric from the George Michael song “Freedom! ‘90” included a truly diverse lineup themed around issues of secrecy: a clandestine affair between two men, a trans woman able to pass as cis at her job, an Indian woman negotiating her open sexuality in Australia versus her closeted life in India, and more. This almost self-conscious attempt at emphasizing diversity of experience, and merging lines that might otherwise segregate, felt like a test drive for re-structuring the audience-environments Outfest conditions. Yet, the continued insistence on traditional categories of “Boys Shorts” and “Girls Shorts” suggests a financial dependence on older models and audience attendance rituals.

While these lines are the result of ticket tiers and programming decisions, first in the minds of festival workers that then translate into structural organization, the ground they subsequently shape is felt as a matter of space and affect. Roya Rastegar closed her piece on OutFest Fusion by posing the question “Who feels comfortable at OutFest and who does not?,” referencing the whiteness of Outfest’s typical organization, and affirming *feeling* and affect as fundamental productions of the LGBTQ film festival environment (495). Lines signify the means by which festivals channel and direct affective orientations, where the imaginary construct of “the queer film festival,” so frequently a site of immense nostalgia, is issued to the consumer. But lines are not strictly tools of division. Joan Nestle demonstrated “line acts” as possessing performative potential, as fields that can be occupied knowingly and with deliberate intent

towards a queer goal. The current organization of Outfest demonstrates ambivalence and a mediated desire between a queer organization devoid of traditional identity markers and a historic one tied to them. This affect of *in-betweenness,* also found amongst the festival's rainbows, lends a complicated weight of feeling to merely waiting in line.

5.6 Conclusion: Trans Auteurs and Career Mobility at Outfest

The 2018 Outfest film festival presented a crystallization of affective in-betweenness by programming two films directed by the same trans woman, Zackary Drucker, from different points in her career. One, *At Least You Know You Exist,* made in collaboration with legendary New York City drag queen and activist Flawless Sabrina, was an earlier film of Drucker's from 2011, granted a revival for the 2018 festival within a superb program of trans short films titled "Desire and Resistance: Unearthing Trans* Legacies," curated by Finn Paul, the same program that introduced me to *FlyHole* by Malic Amalya. Playing on Sunday, July 15th, to a small but passionate audience at the Roy and Edna Disney CalArts Theater, known colloquially as REDCAT, *At Least You Know You Exist* is a dreamy remembrance of a visit to Flawless Sabrina's NYC apartment. Drucker narrates a memory of attending a party at Sabrina's, recalling a mysterious woman saying "Welcome to the time capsule. God knows if we're going forward, or back." The film shows Drucker and Sabrina in various acts of performative exploration, donning various costumes, wigs, and poses with experimental glee. Drucker touchingly summarizes the importance of queer and trans elders in the formation of LGBTQ identities: "Because of you, I know I exist."

The previous day, Drucker's newer film *Mother Comes to Venus,* an 8-minute short, played the festival. At the comparably ostentatious Harmony Gold Theater, I folded into a large

and excited audience that was gathered to see the end result of the Queeroes initiative. Described as "a mentorship program designed to elevate storytelling from queer, trans, and POC points of view," Queeroes was funded by media company Condé Nast, and their then-new digital platform for LGBTQ-specific issues, *them.* Queeroes paired rising LGBTQ cinematic talent with established mentors Joey Soloway, Lena Waithe, and Tanya Saracho. Drucker was among the selected mentees, along with Chelsea Woods and Natalia Leite (Gardner). *Mother Comes to Venus,* Drucker's film made through the program, is a sharp comedy imagining a "post tipping point" Hollywood at the mercy of a trans woman super-agent played by Alexandra Grey. Enjoying clearly increased resources from *At Least You Know You Exist, Mother Comes to Venus* showcases glossy cinematography and craft to question what happens to trans creatives rising through the ranks of entertainment capitalism.

To label one film transgressive outside art and the other a mainstream-friendly industrial pathway is to enforce a restrictive binary neither film deserves, and to undercut the same spirit of cunning trans experimental art that cuts through both. Yet in their differences, the films carry echoes of transformation and alternate worlds of queer and trans life, strung together by the LGBTQ film festival as an exhibitor. The spectator straddles both worlds, with the conjoining technology of the film festival a route to mediated affective. A glorious past doesn't invalidate the present, but colors its contours and shapes its desiring memories. Affective media networks produce meaning out of the negotiated affects of contrasting emotional appeals, a balancing act granted unique poignancy for LGBTQ lives through the currents of nostalgia, ambivalence, and frustration animating our relationships to the past. LGBTQ film festivals are containers for this exchange of affect, expressing emergent and lingering attachments through the navigation of individual routes through LGBTQ cultural history.

Conclusion: Ryan Murphy, Historical Bloodbaths, and the Future(s) of LGBTQ Nostalgia Media

For all the media forms I've discussed throughout this dissertation, television and its brand of mediated nostalgia has been strangely underserved. Recent scholarship emphasizes all the ways television is inherently a very nostalgic medium. Gary Cross, in *Consumed Nostalgia,* considers the circulation and revival of vintage television shows from the 1950s and 60s one of the major sites of nostalgic fan activity in American culture. Amy Holdsworth, in *Television, Memory, and Nostalgia,* dubs television itself a "nostalgic technology" (126), one that "is understood as part of both a material network of memory and a system of everyday memory-making within and in relation to the home and family." This refers not only to the cultural roles ascribed to television but television's formal properties as well, noting "the patterns of haunting, the play with 'after-images' and the forms and pleasures of repetition" that define serial narrative style (3). Television depends on memory, and like all other areas of media meaning-making, it supplements that dependence with affective contexts of sentimentality that frequently cohere as the affective formation of nostalgia.

The American television industry has molded one particular career that stands out with unique significance to mediated constructions of LGBTQ nostalgia, as an auteur figure personifying the increasing codified evolution of LGBTQ nostalgia media as a market niche. Ryan Murphy's immense success, primarily as a television producer and showrunner, has positioned him as an emblem of the representational gains for LGBTQ visibility on television over the course of the 21st century, as a type of success story familiar to the age of

homonormativity. Murphy's whiteness and gay masculinity may enable him a freedom of movement denied to other queer creatives, but equally his pragmatism and willingness to "play ball" with the established conventions of Hollywood have ensured a healthy career that has withstood considerable transformations to television writ large. Coincident with this success, Murphy has been able to bring many LGBTQ stories to American television in a thoroughly notable broadening to LGBTQ media representation. Ron Becker has described him as "a multicultural-empowerment-narrative auteur" for the contexts of social relevance frequently baked into his programming ("Queer Power" 17). As the television industry continues to shift and mutate, from networks to the streaming era, Murphy's position indicates an enduring industrial respect afforded to individual showrunner-producer-auteurs. His move from 21st Century Fox to Netflix in 2018, earned him a path-breaking $300 million deal (Weber 2).

Murphy's rise in Hollywood has happened simultaneously with my own becoming as a queer person, making his brand of contingently permissible queerness one I have affectively orbited, with varying relationalities of desire, jealousy, distance, and contempt; in other words, the kind of complex multi-pronged history of emotion, not just for me but for LGBTQ spectators writ large, that makes the study of feelings (and ambivalent feelings specifically) so critical to media worlds. In a casual think piece on the film *The Whale* (dir. Darren Aronofsky, 2022) I wrote for the LGBTQ news website *Pride Source,* I referred to Murphy's most successful and iconic show, *Glee* (Fox, 2009–2015), as a representation of the kind of proto-woke gay tolerance offered by media in the late-2000s and early-2010s, one that nonetheless already felt at the time like a restrictive container that only made room for certain bodies and identities ("From One Whale to Another"). *Glee* has subsequently stood as "both a benchmark and a catalyst for many of Murphy's other projects," many of which have taken the form of LGBTQ historical television

dramas (Weber 15). Recently, I've witnessed *Glee*'s particular construction of saucy, gossipy late-2000s American high school resonate with my own students, who find the show independently on streaming networks and have helped it maintain popularity.[77] Their high school years have been defined by even more technological saturation that I experienced, with the further instability of heightened threats of violence and the immense disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, events surely accentuating their own nostalgia for a mythic late-2000s high school. Aging in media worlds is a process of seeing one's own bad objects become the fodder for a younger generation's attachment-archive, nostalgically imagining a time that they couldn't participate in, and a time that perhaps never was. Honoring these nostalgic attachments and their legitimacy becomes a challenging task, as the movement of time inevitably moves one generation out of syncopation with the desires of another. But it's also a healthy reminder of nostalgia's wide variability as a cultural tool, and its chaotic saturation in and around different generational archives.

Beyond *Glee,* Murphy has become known for a wide array of historically-focused LGBTQ media, primarily on television, with some excursions into cinema and theater. Creating a veritable "History of LGBTQ America"– in very selective case studies in keeping with his taste– Murphy has spearheaded into being:

- *Running with Scissors* (2006): Prior to his major television successes in the 2010s, Murphy directed the film adaptation of Augusten Bourroughs' memoir of gay youth and complex women in 1970s America.

[77] *Glee*'s popularity with younger viewers was the subject of a Refinery29 article in 2022 by Allie Daisy King titled "It's Been 7 Years Since *Glee* Ended, So Why Is It Still So Popular?"

- *The Normal Heart* (2014), television film adaptation of Larry Kramer's 1986 play about the AIDS crisis for HBO (director/producer)
- *Feud: Bette and Joan* (2017), FX miniseries on the legendary feud between queer icons Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, and the filming of *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962) (director/writer/producer)
- *The Assassination of Gianni Versace: American Crime Story* (2018), FX miniseries on mid-90s gay serial killer Andrew Cunanan (director/producer)
- *Pose* (2018-2021), FX series on Harlem drag ball culture and the AIDS crisis set in the 1980s (director/writer/producer)
- *The Boys in the Band* (2019) and later cinematic adaptation (2020): Broadway revival of the classic 1968 ground-breaking play of gay male friends (producer)
- *Hollywood* (2020), Netflix miniseries featuring LGBTQ people in the motion picture industry in the 1940s (director/writer/producer)
- *Circus of Books* (2020), documentary on a gay bookstore in West Hollywood, focusing on the 1980s and onwards (producer)
- *A Secret Love* (2020), documentary on 1940s lesbian baseball player Terry Donahue (producer)
- *Ratched* (2020-), Netflix series depicting villain Nurse Ratched before *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest,* focusing on the experience of queer people in state-run mental health facilities in the 1950s (director/producer)

- *Halston* (2021), Netflix miniseries on the life of designer Halston and the queer 1970s (writer/producer)
- *Dahmer–Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* (2022)*,* Netflix miniseries on gay serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer's life from the 1970s–1990s (writer/producer)
- *Feud: Capote vs. The Swans* (2024), FX miniseries on Truman Capote's entanglements with New York City socialites in the 1970s (writer/producer)

From this extensive list, Murphy has carved a sizable industrial niche for himself as one of the preeminent producers of LGBTQ nostalgia media, distinctly telling a version of LGBTQ history, through various moments and eras. I've positioned him at the conclusion of this dissertation as a reflection of LGBTQ nostalgia media's capturability within dominant capitalistic systems of media industry. The examples of LGBTQ nostalgia media referred to throughout this dissertation all exist as commodities in competitive media economies, but in nostalgia's relishing of the obsolescent– expired value, expired time– they contain residue of transformational, radical properties that speak to a queer ethos outside of homonormative demands. Affect formulates the in-between. LGBTQ historical dramas grant contemporary queers a window into the past they consume desirously, even as they're couched in prestige economies of value that specifically contour the nature of their historical fantasies to larger social and political systems. Online social media tools around cruising attempt to navigate the push and pull of technological standards and economies, while evidencing unique embeddedness in codes of sexual contact, and gender and sexual identities. LGBTQ historical documentaries possess their own capacities and fantasies, while LGBTQ film festivals prolong an inherently nostalgic ritual towards community reconciliation. Each of these media genres *pleasure, remember,* and *mediate,* as part of their

coordination with LGBTQ media worlds. But compared to these sometimes-modest economies, Murphy's television brand represents a larger codification of LGBTQ nostalgia media as a genre that continues to churn out new iterations and strategies of media messaging towards LGBTQ publics.

This messaging possesses a recognizable style, consistent from program to program albeit in varying intensities. Murphy's shows utilize a somewhat campy, exaggerated vernacular of dramatic television that, true to nostalgic pleasure's alternating emotional colors, finds much to relish in stories of both triumph and tragedy, couched in an attachment-archive of historical camp most frequently associated with gay men. His style has been described as "queer baroque" (Weber 1), prone to what Brenda R. Weber and David Greven describe as:

> queer-inflected genres like horror and melodrama, a penchant for camp drama and sentimentality, an adulation of older female-identified stars who are given the opportunity to be divas once more, and the exquisite, sometimes painful, balance between reverence and critique (3).

American Horror Story, the long-running FX anthology series which began in 2011 and has aired eleven more seasons since, best showcases this Murphy style. *Freak Show,* the show's 1950s-set fourth season and the subject of this conclusion, contains a shot in its fifth episode that speaks to the stylistic register of *American Horror Story*'s brand of camp. Elsa Mars (played by Jessica Lange), the German ex-pat vaudevillian inspired by Marlene Dietrich at the center of *Freak Show*'s narrative, returns to her dressing room oasis following a disastrous singing performance in her titular "Freak Show."[78] She is soon visited by a mysterious man (played by

[78] *Freak Show* would be Jessica Lange's last season with *American Horror Story* (save a guest appearance in the show's eighth installment, *Apocalypse*), after helping to put the show on the map critically and with awards institutions through her bravura performances in *Murder House, Asylum,* and *Coven.* It was widely suggested at the

Denis O'Hare).

Figure 6.1 – Elsa stares in a preponderance of mirrors before being visited by a mysterious man.

In a meticulously choreographed shot, the camera captures Elsa in seven different frames from a collision of mirrors on her vanity dressing table, an appropriate amount of self-love for the show's consummate diva (Figure 6.1) ("Pink Cupcakes"). Mirrors have been used throughout cinema history, notably in the melodramas of Douglas Sirk, to accentuate moments of self-reflection, self-analysis, and duplicity: an interrogation of any supposed natural "truth" outside of performance, and, hence, a goldmine for camp.[79] *American Horror Story'*s showy, excessive style raises this heritage attachment to mirror stylistics to a level of absurd conspicuousness. Why have one mirror shot when you can totally overload the screen with mirrors? *American*

time that Lange was given significant agency in creating the kind of character she would portray for *Freak Show*, as an effort on Murphy's part to convince her to stay. Dietrich, the character's clear inspiration, is an idol of Lange's, and Elsa even claims a real-life rivalry with Dietrich, carrying around a scrapbook of negative reviews of Dietrich's acting (Santola).

[79] For more on mirrors, Douglas Sirk, and camp, see Barbara Klinger's history of discourse on Sirk and artificiality in *Melodrama & Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (1994).

Horror Story's strategies of addition and opulence are catnip for its fans and lovers of camp. Equally they resonate with an aesthetic impulse I previously attributed to *Call Me by Your Name* of a near-impatience with representation itself, a rush to "fuck the peach" that is a notable disjuncture with other aesthetic instincts of LGBTQ nostalgia media emphasizing separation, absence, and an erotic *grazing* of nostalgic fantasy.

Each season of *American Horror Story* tells a different self-contained horror narrative (with discreet bleed-throughs between seasons), many of them similar projects of LGBTQ historicity and nostalgia to Ryan Murphy's other programs. All seasons (after the first) feature LGBTQ characters in major starring roles, as well as LGBTQ actors in major starring roles. The series is therefore a pop culture text– one frequently associated with low-brow, over-the-top storytelling despite its gold-caliber actors– that demonstrates the commercial vitality of LGBTQ nostalgia media as a genre through the filter of television horror. The show's horror frequently doubles as historical drama, with most seasons intimately wed to *pastness* in one way or another, either as setting or overall horror fixation. Theresa L. Geller and Anna Marie Banker write that *American Horror Story* "exemplifies the queerness of temporal drag as a formal structure, communicating the pain of history through its nauseating effects" (36) which includes a "perverse death dive that kills off characters, plotlines, and the future they index repeatedly, in each and every season" (37). *American Horror Story*'s anthology structure– using roughly the same stable of actors, newly regenerated as different monsters or victims depending on the time period/season– has led Robert Sevenich to argue it provides viewers with an education in performativity and the fluidity of identity, using the same actor bodies in a style that "hyperbolizes the concept of theatricality and performance" (41).

What the show also does is stimulate the flow of an affective orientation towards LGBTQ pasts that registers a similar form of ambivalence and conflict as those I've described in the preceding chapters, one couched in the show's style of excess and opulence. The radical trace of nostalgia's threatening queer-generative work feels uniquely contained, defanged even, in a media container that prioritizes the addition of new spectacle above all else. Throughout this dissertation I've shown LGBTQ nostalgia media to be a genre operating in conflict: the concessions of the present against the romance of the past. *American Horror Story: Freak Show,* as part of a television brand exhibiting a heretofore-unseen coordination of LGBTQ nostalgia affects and major Hollywood business, showcases the escalation of this conflicted tension, importantly secured in the economic success of a white cis gay creative often against other identities of the LGBTQ umbrella. But as I've also stated since the beginning, media worlds are complex and incorporate evidence of their own ambivalence and repressed, residual pasts. *American Horror Story: Freak Show* displays both a contemporary standard of homonormative power and the aesthetic muscles that desire haptic vulnerability outside of its broad, presentational style. In its active aesthetics of camp and dormant traces of sensation, evidence of LGBTQ nostalgia media's very *queer* lasting potential and pleasures continues to be visible alongside its pragmatic viability as a market niche.

At the end of the first episode of *American Horror Story: Freak Show*, Elsa and the freak show are shown to the audience for the first time, and Elsa performs a cover of David Bowie's "Life on Mars?" in full sultry Dietrich imitation. She's even outfitted in a Bowie-esque powder blue suit. This is the scene for which the season is probably most known, as a shocking moment of anachronism that delighted and perplexed audiences, although as Geller and Banker describe, "all the seasons reject historical verisimilitude," invested in representations that locate the

"contemporality figured in hauntings of various kinds" (40). The moment performs a collision of different kinds of LGBTQ historical reference, suturing together two antique icons– David Bowie and Marlene Dietrich– and placing both in a (notably queer) historical milieu of 1950s "trash" pop culture that is neither's primary domain, though both lived through it ("Monsters Among Us"). References like these allow Murphy, and the show overall, to exercise notable influence in shaping and articulating a canon of LGBTQ cultural significance to both younger LGBTQ viewers and viewers from other cultures, a phenomenon also studied by Michael Shetina in relation to *RuPaul's Drag Race.*

An area in which *AHS: Freak Show* displays a loving tie to a heritage of gay male cultural production is in its primary antagonist, the wealthy psychopathic serial killer Dandy Mott (played by Finn Wittrock) who takes an interest, eventually a deadly one, in Elsa's freak show.[80] Gary Needham, in his superbly-titled chapter "American Twink Story" describes Dandy as "both a man and a boy, an object of fear and desire, seducer and destroyer; categorically, an evil twink" (83). Beyond simply "an evil twink," Dandy (whose very name carries historically queer connotations) is a summary of the homophobic tropes of dysfunctional, wayward young men frequently characterized as queer villains in Hitchcock films of the time such as *Rope* (1948), *Strangers on a Train* (1952), and *Psycho* (1960). Filmed through the television apparatus of a gay-identifying auteur rather than a heterosexual camera, Dandy's queer deviance is welcomed in a disidentificatory embrace.[81] Apropos of *Strangers on a Train* and *Psycho*, Dandy

[80] *American Horror Story: Freak Show* preceded two Ryan Murphy miniseries that tackled real-life gay serial killers: Andrew Cunanan (played by Darren Criss) in *The Assassination of Gianni Versace: American Crime Story* (FX, 2018) and Jeffrey Dahmer (played by Evan Peters) in *Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* (Netflix, 2022). Murphy's career-long fixation on both real and imagined gay serial killers reflects an interest in the peril and fear associated with gay identity, and the disquieting blur in homoerotic depictions of violence.

[81] José Esteban Muñoz's term "disidentification" refers to the process by which minority subjects rework mass culture's perception of them into a form of empowerment through reclamation and ironic inhabitance. He writes "Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles

has an obsessive, strained relationship with a doting mother figure, Gloria, played with wilting Southern flower camp luminescence by Frances Conroy. Dandy drinks from a detachable rubbery teat akin to a baby bottle topper despite being well into his twenties and has an expert knowledge of the works of Cole Porter and Rodgers & Hammerstein. As he screams and throws fits, his mother often whimpers behind him, wondering why he isn't more interested in girls and offering to play with their collection of June Allyson paper dolls.

As Needham describes, "Murphy's world evidences a penchant for homoeroticism, male beauty, and the remediation of queer erotic fantasy for television consumption" which often takes the form of a "purported expertise in mediating twinks," gay slang for young, thin, objectified men, who are often (and *always* in Murphy's world) white (73). Much like the obsolescent beefcakes fawned over by the Bob Mizer Foundation, Murphy's television show drinks in Dandy as a spectacle of deviant queer masculinity, embracing his body as iconography of a particular era of abject masculine queerness.

and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications" (31).

Figure 6.2 – Dandy takes a break while exercising in his underwear.

In a sequence evocative of Mary Harron's *American Psycho* (2000) in its savoring of a muscular (and deadly) male body, Dandy exercises in snug white briefs while monologuing in voice-over. He mentions his love for Charles Atlas exercise routines and psyches himself up for his impending murders while eroticizing himself, performing what would be an impressive audition for the Bob Mizer Foundation's spokesman, like the example that opened this dissertation. Dandy brags, "I was destined to be the greatest actor of all time. Monty Clift? If I had been in *A Place in the Sun,* George Stevens would have had me do the walk to the electric chair shirtless." He later says, "this body *is* America: strong, violent, and full of limitless potential" (Figure 6.2). The line is a curious one, placing Dandy's body– which the show has trotted out for the viewer's consumption lavishly– as not part of an emergent world of homoerotic physique aesthetics, but defining an entire nationality. This body *is* America. As if a nod to the broad mass market intentions of a show like *American Horror Story,* Dandy's homoeroticism is coded expansively, manufactured to travel beyond the confines of LGBTQ worlds to the larger undifferentiated

public, and perhaps a larger, undifferentiated nostalgia. Even so, the sequence smuggles in specific references of a gay cultural canon and Hollywood history in alignment with Murphy's attachment-archive.

In a search for victims, Dandy goes to a gay bar. Like the visions of liminal queer underground club life Todd Haynes and company crafted in *Far from Heaven* and *Carol,* there is a cozy ambiance to the historical fantasy Murphy and company create for this episode of *American Horror Story.* In line with the show's broad, joyful anachronisms, Bryan Ferry's "Slave to Love" blares on the soundtrack. A proto-go-go boy of questionable historical reality dances into the center of the room, with a jaunty sailor's cap perched on his head just like the models in Squirt's advertising. Dandy soon meets Andy (Murphy regular Matt Bomer), a gay sex worker whom the audience already knows as the lover of another character on the show, the freak show's "strong man" Dell (Michael Chiklis). Andy is an aspiring artist and exhibits a world-weary cynicism over the actions of otherwise straight-identifying men like Dell claiming to love him. Andy seems to possess an untroubled security in his own sexuality. As if beamed in from whichever club in the future is playing "Slave to Love," Andy projects a contemporary resonance, anticipating future gay identities, at odds with the past-coded nature of both Dandy and the show's overall camp, antique styling.

Yet Dandy are Andy are thrust together, soon relocated to Dandy's recently-acquired trailer for what Andy believes will be a sexual encounter. The men nervously eye each other in the darkened trailer. After Dandy initially protests "I'm not a fruit!" he proposes stripping down to their underwear facing away from each other. They both do, and once only clad in small white briefs, Dandy dons a ceremonial clown mask and a knife, and a furtive bodily encounter between the two men turns deadly. The men struggle in their matching underwear, in a display visually

indiscernible from an act of violence or sexual consummation. The camera angle feels notably detached, watching the two men posed in homoerotic death match as statuary models, as opposed to up-close embodiment. This stylistic focus continues when we see Dandy disposing of Andy's body parts, but not the actual dismembering itself. Andy is finally murdered, but not before several incredulous returns-to-life, one even mid-dismemberment, to which Dandy absurdly shouts, "YOU'RE MAKING ME FEEL BAD!" ("Pink Cupcakes").

Just as the "Life on Mars?" performance conjoined Bowie with Dietrich, a strange collision occurs in this scene between a clearly openly gay character (one even played by an openly gay actor) and a character signifying a meta compilation of historical gay stereotypes and coding (and, to match in retreat from a sense of social "progress," played by a straight actor). Darren Elliot-Smith wrote about a similar dynamic in the HBO series *True Blood,* a show with a habit of putting queerly-coded vampires next to openly-LGBTQ characters in a disjunctive time warp. The episode stages an erotic, embodied altercation between the two of them– between past and present– and even as the past "wins" the present refuses to withdraw.

I've flirted with a number of binaries over the course of this dissertation– reflective vs restorative, opaque vs. clear, *Carol* vs. *Call Me by Your Name,* Squirt vs Grindr, John Wojtowicz vs. Liz Eden– and here Dandy and Andy threaten to become another one. But rather than reinforce them as absolute opposites I'd like to consider them, not unlike the different sites at Outfest, as a poles that we are negotiated between as LGBTQ media consumers in the 21st century. Ryan Murphy's clear reverence for LGBTQ history and culture animates much of his cultural output; he is a card-carrying nostalgist who hopes to both archive the past and luxuriate in the sentimental affectivities of its contexts. But equally so is he an emblem of contemporary homonormative media industries, with a reductive effect of representational standards molded to

non-confrontational, universalist standards of inclusion. This episode of *American Horror Story: Freak Show* stages a horror scenario that is contextualized with the clash of the two. Toggling between the poles of Dandy and Andy– a campy past and a pragmatic present– Ryan Murphy's industrialization of LGBTQ nostalgia represents an incarnation of LGBTQ nostalgia media that feels ever-more locked in hegemony, far from reconciling tensions and instead speaking to the ongoing frictions between the allure of the past and the requirements of the present. His particular orientation of the affective properties of LGBTQ nostalgia indicates LGBTQ nostalgia media's forever landed-ness in conflict and indecision, speaking to tensions of past and present, and reaching for analog pleasure as a balm against the irreconcilable.

I'm ambivalent about *American Horror Story.* I frequently derive joy from the acting and the camp spectacle of it all, while feeling paradoxically under-nourished by the show's strategies of addition and relentless excess. Even within a single season, there is little commitment to legible motivations of plot or character, the show instead defined by a restless pursuit of new levels of shock and spectacle. Scholarship on the show unintentionally exhibits this lack of coherency. For example, in Sevenich's aforementioned study of *Freak Show,* Dandy is described as having "traits that classify as a first-class citizen and among the majority: he is a white, handsome, wealthy, heterosexual man" (48). In the face of the rampant queer coding connecting Dandy to the wayward queer men of cinema past, Sevenich describes Dandy as part of the show's configuration of a heterosexual power structure. And he isn't too notably incorrect for doing so: the arc of the season does insist on Dandy ultimately as a representation of the white, wealthy power structure against which the underdog survivors of the freak show come to triumph. LGBTQ pleasures feel incoherent and diffuse in *American Horror Story*: source of LGBTQ relationality one episode, anti-LGBTQ obstacle the next. The insistence on shock and

accumulation, rather than a coordinated *celebration* of queerness and other marginal identities, begins to feel like a reminder of the imagined heteronormative audience being lured to a freak show of escalating spectacle. As Brenda R. Weber and David Greven describe Murphy's output:

> his foregrounding of forms of vulnerability is at once an admirable and a suspect project, indicative of his socially conscious attitudes and redolent of his tendency to render immediately commercial any social problem that comes his way, whether or not it comes from the heart, as it were (11).

This amorphous, difficult-to-describe vacancy where Weber and Greven describe something coming "from the heart" positions LGBTQ spectators, like myself, in an ambivalent position when it comes to Murphy's work. Perhaps it's all just putting on a "freak show."

In Sevenich's analysis of *Freak Show,* he is interested in Elsa's double-sided nature, living as one of the "freaks" in her obsolescence and gaudy theatricality (and hiding the fact she has two prosthetic legs, a discreet position on the continuum of disability rendered theatrically-exhibitable as a "freak" body) while simultaneously undermining them, exploiting them, and occasionally putting them in grave peril. He writes, "characters with covert abnormalities commoditize and assert control over freak show performers so they may assimilate and conceal their own deformities" (48). This statement of a kind of insincere LGBTQ ethics, occupying one part of queer coalition while exploiting others, could apply even more roundly to Dandy, a queer character whose abusive actions, masculinity, whiteness, and wealth render him an oppressive force in *Freak Show.* But by extension, this description could also apply to Ryan Murphy himself, the cis gay auteur wrangling the freak show.

Recent events in Murphy's career have raised questions about LBGTQ coalition, inclusion, and equality. Angelica Ross, a Black trans woman actress who worked with Murphy

on the 1980s and '90s-set Harlem Ball Room drama *Pose* (FX, 2019–2021) and two seasons of *American Horror Story,* one also set in the '80s (*1984,* FX, 2019), has done considerable labor within Murphy and company's imaginary of a nostalgically-inflected LGBTQ past. But in 2023, Ross spoke out negatively about her experiences on social media, citing a chaotic and bullying experience on the set of *American Horror Story,* attributing it primarily to her co-star Emma Roberts. Ross re-called negative experiences negotiating with Murphy for compensation at the level of her peers, and for safety concerns being dismissed on his sets. She felt she was used by Murphy to "paint a narrative" for his support of trans and non-white stories and creatives, reduced in "another form of tokenization." Ross, who already had an established career in trans politics and computer coding prior to her shift to acting, described the entire experience as clarifying her decision to leave Hollywood and the media industries (Abramovitch). Ross' experiences are an important reminder of what lies beneath the optics of change in mainstream Hollywood industry. Equally, it suggests, much like the fault lines at the heart of LGBTQ documentary representation, ongoing points of tension in LGBTQ coalition that go unreconciled, as material connection to power butts up against the projected utopian fantasy of queer politics. The media genres promoting the affective lure of LGBTQ nostalgia summon such affects from these potentially compromised conditions, shaking the foundations on which the imaginary rests.

Dandy Mott, an evil twink perfectly in syncopation with the currents of a queer male nostalgic attachment-archive, receives another tribute to his physique at the end of *Freak Show*'s eighth episode, "Blood Bath." Following his murder of his mother, after suspecting she collaborated with psychiatric authorities, Dandy takes a literal "blood bath," in a white clawfoot bathtub filled with his mother's blood (there's, of course, no explanation for how on earth he de-sanguinated his mother so completely). In a scene of typical visual extravagance, Dandy walks

up his indoor miniature golf course in a crimson red robe, unfurling and dropping it just as he reaches the bathtub. The shot dissolves after a glimpse of Dandy's naked buttocks, transitioning into an extreme close-up of his hands reaching out and coming together, relaxed in the red blood (Figure 6.3). The effect is libidinous, Murphy's camera replicating a visual of hands touching Dandy's butt, without any touch literally taking place ("Blood Bath"). The carnal drive of the sequence, fucking the evil twinks of history, displays a clear reference to the aesthetics of haptic visuality driving much nostalgic pleasure in LGBTQ media, an enfleshed fantasy of twink materiality. The aesthetics of *American Horror Story* typically eschew such up-close provocation; mirroring perhaps the stage/audience separation of a freak show, the show favors wide shots of broad display over the kind of savored tactilities of haptically visual media. But here the affects of haptic pleasure are summoned, complete with an ultimate ghostly absence: whatever erotic "touch" happens in this montage, it is a fictive creation of editing.

Figure 6.3 – At the intersection of two shots, two hands appear to touch Dandy's buttocks.

American Horror Story: Freak Show's nostalgia for evil gay stereotypes of the past requires an ironic distance in its pleasure, one re-calibrating darkness as culturally significant camp performance. But its construction of a "blood bath," the pleasures of enfleshed tactility floating unsettlingly alongside the residue and evidence of human cruelty, speak simultaneously of the costs of mediated nostalgic fantasies as they emerge from dominant power structures. As an important standardization of LGBTQ nostalgia media as a brand for entertainment capitalism, *American Horror Story* implies a future of LGBTQ nostalgia media that is coordinated through privilege and community discord, to the discontent and mistreatment of trans people and people of color. Whiteness and wealth seem like the preferred genres of nostalgic resonance, and in the staged conflict of the elusive past and the homonormative present– represented in Dandy's earlier fight with Andy– the present remains a configuring hold against what Elizabeth Freeman describes as the genuine "threat" of the past, to undo hierarchies and expose other possibilities of future (63). The radical potential of nostalgia, often an animating engine in LGBTQ nostalgia media, seems partially failed by the consolidation of a media brand.

For this reason, the moment of sensual haptic intensity in the blood bath almost reads to me as a kind of temporary reprieve. Against the broad, presentational style of *American Horror Story*– the freak show– haptic identification's unruly pleasures, a fantasy of embodiment that is here mythically queer and of the past, appear as a suggestion of the possibility of other aesthetics, other approaches reshaping the containers of LGBTQ nostalgia media. The impossible hands, of Dandy but also not, detached through cinematic technology, graze a past from a lustful but removed distance. Touch has been laden with so many fantasies and value systems over the history of queer thought; here it continues to be configured as a portal outside a text's pragmatic foreclosures. Camp's "gorgeous refusal to exit the condemned," in the words of

Clare Hemmings, finds sustenance in a mixed or disappointing text, once again residing in an affective zone of ambivalence (164). Pleasures taken and found from LGBTQ nostalgia media respond to a context of what Kadji Amin describes as "living with damage in a damaged world," dealing with texts and systems that have become thoroughly de-idealized (10). Nostalgia's role as an affective formation at the intersection of positive and negative feelings configures a hope for transcendence even in the fears of a compromised present.

LGBTQ nostalgia media constructs worlds and a shared past, through affective communication of desire and pleasure. Distinct from just an optimistic distortion that hides everything negative about the past, LGBTQ nostalgia as an affective formation holds a bittersweet combination of light and dark affects that feels echoed in the systems of alternation and binaries that modulate pleasure in the aesthetic experience of media textuality. In a complicated history, for a complicated coalitional public of diverse gender and sexual expression, LGBTQ media worlds call on pleasure as an organizational device, holding fast to attachments as orienting principles. To return to a structure suggested in the introduction, it is most instructive to understand the cultural work of LGBTQ nostalgia media along three verbs: *pleasure, remember, and mediate*.

LGBTQ nostalgia media reconciles a flavor of *pleasure* that is distinctly embodied, rooted in the properties of human sensation and embodiment. Finding nostalgic pleasure in the present means calling upon a balance of presence and absence, the erotic play of give and take, that itself calls attention to the liminal ephemerality of our ties to the past. LGBTQ historical prestige cinema represents a concession to the industrial economies of buzz and awards attention that validate queer experience under very specific parameters. But as a kind of reconciling concession, the hint of queer transcendence remains in an aesthetic strategy valuing the

transformative powers of touch. LGBTQ nostalgia media insists on the validities of pleasure, radical and not, as an affordance of media worlds.

LGBTQ nostalgia media is the evidentiary archive of a LGBTQ cultural imperative to *remember* when memory and history themselves are complicated notions for LGBTQ populations, precarious and frequently subject to erasure. Nostalgia media remembers to tell and promote historical narratives, pitched distinctly through an emotional rhetoric of sentimentality. As economies change and media technologies shift, fundamentally changing the composition of queer social worlds along with them, LGBTQ nostalgia media remember as an act of performative record-keeping and to institute an attachment-archive that can bind with generations far outside of their originary sites. Websites like Squirt attempt to configure a balance between old and new, cruising analog and digital, as a means of ensuring cultural continuity and archival integrity.

Most importantly, LGBTQ nostalgia media *mediate* themselves, providing a forum for the activation and processing of divisions and tensions in the worlds of gender and sexual minorities. Highlighting the boundaries enacted by individual group histories' sacred objects and occlusive potentials, the circulation of LGBTQ nostalgia media traces the hope and failures of radical politics, of queer coalition, of trans rights and identities. LGBTQ nostalgia media become mirrors registering the frays and disjunctions in LGBTQ life and summon sentimental and pleasuring affects as a means of easing and healing these wounds. LGBTQ film festival spaces host a lot of these tensions, as a complex media public survives the networking of multiple and contrasting affects, of radical optimism and co-opted industrial pragmatism, the split between LGBTQ and specifically *queer* nostalgias. Ambivalent spaces may be caught between different forms of identification, but they are not the site of stalled cultural development. Sarah Banet-

Weiser reminds us to see ambivalence as "potentially innovative, not a foreclosure but…a possible opening" (219). Through studying the cultural work of LGBTQ nostalgia media, one thing that is thoroughly clear to me is it constitutes the space for opening theories of LGBTQ subjectivity that commune with the past to furnish and affectively illuminate the present and future.

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