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Suicidality as a Discourse of Safety in the Queer Youth Movement

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SUICIDALITY AS A DISCOURSE OF SAFETY IN THE QUEER YOUTH MOVEMENT

by

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

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In November of 1991, a group of queer teenagers gathered at the Massachusetts State House in Boston. Two years later, the state passed the first law in the nation adding sexual orientation to the list of protected classes in the state's schools. The November 1991 rally was the first public expression of what became the safe schools movement, which would go on over the following decade to transform the landscape in public education for LGBTQ students. A notable feature of the November rally was the staging by the youth of a mass performative act of queer suicide. Through the Foucauldian concepts of discourse and reverse discourse, the work places the events of that day together with the queer youth movement it helped to kindle in context with broader narratives of safety in LGBTQ community organizing and identity. I argue that the success of the strategy taken by the queer youth movement of the early- to mid-1990s is ultimately the result of a reversal of the discourses of pathology attending homosexuality.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Throughout, I use the expressions 'gay and lesbian,' 'lgbt,' 'lgbtq,' 'homosexual,' and 'queer' quite interchangeably. This is intentional. I am concerned in this work with questions of meaning and identity. The ways in which we talk about ourselves and the words we use are part of this. Identity is fluid and its defining characteristics and content are a constant work in progress. I find it unhelpful to insist upon any one term or phrase to refer to such dynamic assemblages of persons, and find myself equally incapable of delimiting the possible range of application of any such. Although each of these expressions may have a more or less specific meaning at any given point, it is in their constellation that a fuller idea of the expansiveness of 'queer' identity and communities might best be suggested.

My aunt Mary, who had come out in the 1970s, referred to herself both as a gay woman and as a lesbian, somewhat interchangeably. When I came out we mostly talked about ourselves as being gay or lesbian. Queer was considered a more radical identity claim, expressing much the same content as gay or lesbian, with a more intentionally combative stance. Use of queer has today become more widespread, almost taking the place of 'gay and lesbian.' Given these shifts in significance and usage over time, I find changefulness in this matter rather better represents the historical record than would any attempt at regularity or consistency. This of course excepts those instances where, either explicitly or contextually, I use a particular phrase in its historical, nominal, or etymological senses.

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Introduction

This work is a study of the queer youth movement I was a part of twenty-five years ago. My participation in that movement occurred in thousands of moments and experiences, some involving hours of scheduled work, others a single day or afternoon, many almost ephemeral. The breadth of my inquiry reflects the fact that my own experience of those changes was so encompassing. My intent is to analyze the queer youth movement of the early- to mid-1990s in order to understand its significance in the changes which occurred in queer identity and community during these years.

At the center of my inquiry stands a single event, a moment I locate at the crux of the history of the queer youth movement in the early 1990s. The event I am concerned here to understand occurred at a rally of queer students at the Massachusetts State House in November of 1991. During the rally, students enacted performative acts of suicide to illustrate the stakes involved in their political demands. I contend that these performative acts of queer suicide constitute an event in which a new discourse of queer identity was introduced.

The frame given to the needs and demands of queer youth that November day was only one of the imaginable ways in which these might have been conceived or presented. It led over the next few yeas to the creation of a state-wide program intended to improve the safety of queer youth in school. Understanding how this framing of demands by a group of gay and lesbian teenagers in 1991 came to have such a significant effect on the evolution of the movement for LGBTQ equality requires examining the role discourses of safety have played within queer identity and communities.

Attendees at the November 1991 rally demanded 'a state advisory board' that would be the "first statewide program targeting gay and lesbian youth."[1] The circumstance articulated as underpinning this demand took the form of a recently released report on the elevated instance of suicide among LGBTQ youth. The literature on the prevalence of suicide among young queers was less developed then, it has since grown to become extensive. What began as testimony of the lived experience of queer youth became over the next years increasingly elaborated as a medical discourse undergirding state intervention.

I contend that the discourses of safety and of queer suicidality have worked as dual strategies to present both to the lager heteronormative society and to queer subculture itself a reverse discourse of pathology centered around a newly conceived subject, queer youth. This allowed homosexuality to be contained via a discourse of harm which appears to question homophobia without empowering the homosexual subject. This was towards the purpose of reclaiming certain, valuable, members of society who might otherwise be lost to a resurgent queer subculture, alongside appealing to the heteronormative culture by making safe, sanitizing, homosexuality.

The discourses of safety articulated by the queer youth movement came to achieve centrality in contemporary queer identity and communities. To understand how this occurred, it is necessary to appreciate several interrelated elements. First, the historical position of the queer youth movement in relation to the larger LGBTQ rights movement. Second, the fact that the history of the larger LGBTQ rights movement is characterized by a tension between its more radical and its more moderate incarnations. Third, it is necessary to understand the convergences

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[1] Associated Press, "Gay teens try lobbying, say they need support to prevent suicide," *North Adams Transcript*, November 15, 1991.

and interweaving among both the LGBTQ rights movements and the queer youth movement within the history and development of the mainstream political left.

Having been excluded, and hence abject, gays, lesbians, and queers had come over time to form identities and communities outside of the main currents of the dominant heteronormative society. These became increasingly refined over the course of the 1970s. In the 1980s, the AIDS crisis made the existence of queer communities outside of the mainstream society increasingly untenable. In their demands for recognition from heteronormative society, LGBTQ communities and individuals grappled with and transformed the longstanding discourse of pathology through which most people made sense of homosexuality and which remained a terrible and cogent force in queer subculture as well.

In the early 1990s ACT UP was intimately involved in the struggle for queer equality. A resurgence of more moderate political claims occurred also at this time to contest the radicalism perceived in the ACT UP position. The trajectory of the LGBT rights movement over the past thirty years has been along neoliberal lines of professionalization and bureaucratization. The genealogy of the gay and lesbian youth movement provides an understanding to how the traditions of radical LGBTQ activism became wedded to the queerly quietist approach and a politics of respectability.

The focus on gay and lesbian youth helped allow a rearticulation of a gay-rights agenda separate of the trajectory inscribed by ACT UP. It may after all be easy to forget, given the hallowed place ACT UP has come to hold in the queer historical imaginary, that in the early 1990s there were many both within the queer community and certainly without who were horrified by the spectacles they presented.

There had been for decades a tension between radical queer organizing which challenged the heteronormative structures of society and a more inclusionist variety which sought inclusion into these. As I will discuss below, the radicalism of ACT UP is more complicated than it is often presented as being. Both more expansive in its potential to effect widespread social change, but also circumscribed by its own queer genealogy of radical identarianism.

The early 1990s were transformative both for queer subculture and for the attitudes held towards homosexuality in the wider society.[2] My interest in this period is rooted in this fact, and also in my own life experience. From 1992 to 1994 I was deeply involved in queer youth organizing in eastern Massachusetts. As a member of the Boston Alliance of Gay and Lesbian Youth (B.A.G.L.Y.), a high school student working with the Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, through involvement with a gay youth speaker's bureau, and in a hundred more ephemeral but equally important spaces.

The constellation of these spaces, organizations, relationships, and movements when taken together in their entirety provide a window into the transformation of a queer youth movement into the 'Safe Schools' movement. The demand for safety became a narrative assimilating some queer youth into the mainstream and away from the more radical ideologies of queer separatism associated with a sexual expressionism always viewed uncomfortably by many and now deeply compromised by the trauma of the AIDS crisis. The project of 'Making Schools Safe' – the title of a 1993 report produced by the Massachusetts Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth – required also making homosexuality safe.

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[2] See: John D'Emilio, *The World Turned: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 116.

Locating an Event

Researching the queer youth movement, I came to see the November 1991 youth rally as lying at the crux of the introduction of a discourse of safety into the heart of that movement. To situate the November 1991 Queer Youth Rally in its historical context I make use of the Foucauldian concepts of genealogy and of discourse. This is because, while describing the event itself begins to indicate its originality and its quality as both historically reflective and generative, more than a description is necessary to make sense of the event.

As I began looking for means by which to interpret the full significance of that event as a seminal moment in the history of the movement, this led me to the work of Christina B. Hanhardt, who examines the centrality of safety in discourses of queer identity through the lens of anti-violence movements.[3] This then required me to make sense of the interrelation of the discourse of safety I found being articulated in the queer youth movement and that which Hanhardt had located in queer anti-violence movements.

The value of Foucault's genealogical approach is that, "[r]ather than moving forward from a determinate origin and proceeding according to a smooth logic of progression, history through the lens of genealogy begins accidentally and proceeds by fits and starts."[4] The genealogical approach to history more accurately represents the unfolding of social reality than does a more teleological and progressive paradigm. To understand the fall 1991 rally as a genealogical event works to lift it out of the progressive narrative in which it is embedded and allow reinterpretation of the, now extracted, event.

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[3] Christina B. Hanhardt, *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), see especially: Chapters Three and Four.
[4] Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 44.

Much of my work is concerned with attempting to reveal the fullness of the situated meaning of the genealogical event I have located, given the discourses which surround, precede, parallel, and proceed from it. Foucault's genealogical approach led me to understand the fall 1991 rally not only as a result or as a precursor but as a nexus, an event which allows for insight into the construction of discourses of identity which have deeply influenced the unfolding of that history.

The historical reinterpretation I attempt herein makes use also of the Foucauldian concepts of discourse and reverse discourse. Throughout the following sections, I will dwell on the significance of these in the elaboration of contemporary queer history and identity. First, I would like to say something about what led me to consider the use of the concept of discourse as an approach and why I believe such a concept is necessary to understand the history of the queer youth movement.

The Uses of a Discourse

Discourses are relations of power which, by allowing those who operate within them to participate in their construction, enmesh individuals within networks of social control.[5] So that the stories we tell about ourselves, even when these may be intended to work in a liberatory fashion may serve instead to inhibit the achievement of such.

Queer theorist Michael Warner finds the concept of 'a public' useful for understanding LGBTQ community and identity. According to Warner, public is defined by the fact that it is a relation among strangers united, "through participation alone." This, defining, characteristic distinguishes a public, as the LGBTQ community, from other relations among strangers, as "nations, religions, races, guilds" which are determined by "criteria of territory or identity or belief."[6] This distinction, where LGBTQ community and identity is determined entirely by participation, emphasizes the role of discourse in the creation and maintenance of the community and identity. Discourse is both participatory and also determinative.

In Warner's reading, the position of queer communities as either a public or a counterpublic gives these a largely participatory nature in which participation takes the form of communication amongst the many members of a given public or counterpublic. Although queer communities are in some ways as much or more at the mercy of discourses over which they have little control, they also perhaps had a freedom to reconstruct the queer habitus through the elaboration of counter-discourses.

The discourse of queer suicidality was integral to the historic successes of the queer youth movement of the early- to mid-1990s, and is one element of a discourse of safety which

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[5] On the role of discourse in queer identity formation, see: Rosemary Hennessy, "Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture," *Cultural Critique*, no. 29 (1994): 31-76.
[6] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 74-75.

has become central to queer community and identity over the past three decades. This larger

discourse, rooted in a dialectical inversion of older narratives of queer pathology, works both to

make queerness less threatening and to create a path to heteronormativity.[7] The discourse of

suicidality within which the queer youth movement framed its demands served to constitute

queer youth as intelligible citizens exactly because it presented queerness through the prism of

pathology. First homosexuality had been pathologized, then increasingly homophobia. The

discourse of queer suicidality reapplied the pathology to the queer individual, now through the

mechanism of the trauma suffered under homophobia. The political claims of queer suicidality

appeared in a new, and discursive, form on that November day in 1991 inasmuch as the protest

sought to reverse a relationship of force by appropriating a vocabulary and turning it against

"those who had once used it."[8] The reverse discourse of queer suicidality led the movement of

queer youth to become a movement to make them safe.

　　In a dual reversal, the pathology earlier attached to homosexuality was shifted on to the

new concept of homophobia. I argue that this, substantial, change in the position of LGBTQ

people and communities was itself transformed through a further discursive reversal in which the

pathology was shifted once again, this time as an experience imposed upon queers by the social

experience of living in a homophobic society. What this reveals is that the underlying discourse

of pathology was never itself challenged, it was rather leveraged to achieve a remarkable social

change. This reading of the historical record is supported by the extent of that change, which is,

otherwise, difficult to make sense of.

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[7] An almost comically obvious reflection of this reversal of the discourses of safety that I am interested in exploring is seen when compare Anita Bryant's popular campaign in the late 1970s to 'Save the Children' from homosexuality to the 1990s campaign to save students from homophobia.

[8] Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," trans. Bouchard and Simon, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 154.

Writer and social critic Sarah Schulman has described a 'fake, public homosexuality' constructed through the dual strategy of marketing *to* queer consumers alongside the marketing *of* a 'palatable' image of homosexuality.[9] I am indebted to the incisive gaze Schulman turns upon such question, as I am similarly concerned with understanding how queer identity and community has become so effectively brought within the compass of contemporary neoliberal societies. My own argument is that the marriage between queerness and neoliberalism can be understood as resulting from a reversal of the discourse of queer pathology which effected a clinicization of contemporary queer identity.

Central to my argument here is that the discourse of safety which developed in the queer youth movement arose through the interaction of queer movements and the larger neoliberal society. To understand the unfolding and impact of the queer youth movement therefore requires addressing three separate and interrelated phenomenon. First, the queer youth movement and its historical position in LGBTQ movements more broadly. Second, the concepts of discourse and reverse discourse, and the centrality of these to the formation of queer identities and communities. And, third, the role of the discourses of safety and of suicidality more particularly. It is my contention that by looking to the interconnections between queerness and neoliberalism we may understand how these queer discourses of safety which *appear* to challenge oppression, are successful *precisely because* they don't actually challenge the underlying dynamics powering social oppression.

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[9] Sarah Schulman, *Stagestruck: Theater, AIDS, and the Marketing of Gay America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 146.

<u>Here We Foucault, Again</u>

Michel Foucault's concept of discourse might have arisen out his interest in the relation of ideas to each other in the construction of systems of thought. Yet is towards comprehension of the historical and material world that he ultimately employed the concept. Foucault wonders, "what is this specific existence that emerges from what is said and nowhere else?"[10] Foucault's interest in concepts and ideas is rooted in his interest in the way that these develop in history and the effect that they then in turn have on the present. Discourse is a way of describing those apparatuses of power that Foucault was attempting throughout his work to describe. The advantage to the discourse concept in this respect is that it allows for participation and ongoing construction, along with the exertion of limitation and control.

Within the discourse is the discursive act. Foucault proposes turning away from the discourses themselves, the frameworks for understanding the world and human relations which they appear to offer, in search of "a *pure description of discursive events*."[11] Foucault argues that by freeing the discursive statement from the discourse in which it has been embedded one may reveal its meaning. And, he offers a method for doing so. First, Foucault commends us "to restore to the statement the specificity of its occurrence"; second, to "reveal … the space in which discursive events are deployed … is to leave oneself free to describe the interplay of relations within it and outside it"; and, third, he expects that "by freeing them of all the groupings that purport to be natural, immediate, universal unities, one is able to describe other unities."[12] Inspired by Foucault's method, I have herein attempted such a turn away from the

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[10] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Pantheon Books, 1972), 28.
[11] Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 27.
[12] Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 28–29.

story of LGBTQ rights and to pursue instead the significance of a singular moment, so as to 'free' the discursive event from the 'horizon' of discourses already established.

Having developed his concept of discourse in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault introduced the attendant concept of 'reverse' discourse in *The History of Sexuality*, in the context of his description of the changing relationship between societies and homosexuality beginning in the nineteenth-century.[13] I interpret the November 1991 queer youth rally as not only a discursive act, but as one which brought a reverse discourse of its own into being. What is particularly useful about the expression of this reverse discourse of queer pathology is what it reveals about the originary sets of discourses it sets itself out to counter.

Discourses establish the 'normal' as a form of control. Given this, that which is enacted in resistance to the dominant discourse or set of discourses may appear as deviance from the norm. However, Foucault argues that this is not the case, and, that, rather, such resistance actually reinforces, legitimizes, and contributes to the dominant discourse rather than opposes it. From his earliest work, Foucault maintained the argument that power inevitably produces resistance.[14] He was continually interested in the ways in which, historically, such resistance has been subsumed and recuperated back into the relations of power which birthed it.

Reverse discourses, while appearing to challenge the dominant norms of society, might ultimately serve these, inasmuch as they are understood to be an aspect of the originary discourse rather than existing in opposition to, or standing outside of, this. Foucault's concern, according to David Halperin, was "not *liberation* but *resistance*."[15] Foucault disdained the political and

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[13] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 101.
[14] Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 219, et passim.
[15] David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 56.

epistemic project represented by liberation because he saw it as a dead-end, which would end in the recuperation of the reverse discourse of liberation within the original dominant discourse.

Speaking specifically about the implications of Foucault's insights for the discourses of queer liberation, Halperin says that while, "the characteristic and defining political strategy of gay liberation is one of discursive reversal," such strategies are ultimately self-defeating as the very act of reversing a discourse has the effect of 'recapitulating' it, and, so, "thereby extends, prolongs, and fortifies the regime of power/knowledge responsible for constructing the homosexual/heterosexual binarism in the first place."[16] Therefore, the interest of counter- or reverse-discourses may lie not such much in their status as acts or states of resistance as what they tell us about the discourse they are counter to.

The extent to which queerness has constituted, or if it did whether it continues to, resistance to gendered heteronormativity can be interrogated by examining the many discursive turns taken and reversals constructed in the history of contemporary LGBTQ community, identity, and organizing. Central among these is the discourse of safety, and its attendant reverse discourse of queer suicidality. I argue each, in their own turn, forms a continuation of the traditional narrative of homosexual pathology. Yet there are too many other elements involved in the construction of contemporary queer identity, and these must be considered as well.

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[16] Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, 57-58.

The Many Discourses of Queerness

The history of the gay and lesbian rights struggle suggests the importance of the traditions of radical leftist organizing in giving the movement its most effective and potentially transformative aspect. Yet such queer radicalism, as it manifested, had severe limitations. It was by no means only the elements of LGBTQ activism aiming towards inclusion in the dominant society which either lacked the capacity or refrained from engaging in solidarity with other oppressed identities. An essay published in 1980 indicates one of the starkest limits of queer radicalism, in the form of the "frustration with white lesbian separatism" resolutely expressed by lesbians of color.[17] A dichotomy between more radical gay liberationism and more mainstream gay inclusionism is not illusory, yet it is complicated.

The concepts of discourse and of reverse discourse help us to make sense of this complicatedness. I argue that the discourse of queer suicidality arose out of the demands both of queerness and of heteronormativity, separate and also in interaction together. A community is both the product of its history, and of the story it tells about itself. The nature of LGBTQ community and identity is a result of both of these, and each of these in turn are influenced by the particular nature of queerness as an identity. This too illustrates why it is necessary to perceive two interwoven strands to this discursive dynamic. That one more internal to queer community and identity, and that one more located in the heteronormative society as it has entered the neoliberal era.

My exploration of the queer discourse of suicidality employed by the queer youth movement of the early- to mid-1990s considers this as an aspect of the discourses of safety so common to queer identity and community generally. I argue that the specific trope of suicidality

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[17] The essay by Joan Gibbs and Sara Bennet, "Racism and Classism in the Lesbian Community: Towards the Building of a Radical Autonomous Lesbian Movement," is discussed in Hanhardt, *Safe Space*, pp. 141-145.

along with its encompassing narrative of safety are examples of reverse discourses, in this case specifically the result of the reversal of the discourse of pathology attached to homosexuality and gender non-conformity. Christina Hanhardt's exploration of queer discourses of safety leads her to find these rooted in liberalism's turn toward the psychological.

Hanhardt notes that "[d]uring the late 1960s, when the culture of poverty thesis was most widely popularized, another line of research had begun to develop that was also deeply rooted in the psychological explanations for social inequality endemic to postwar liberalism: the study of *homophobia*."[18] Extending Hanhardt's argument helps to illustrate my own. The 'culture of poverty' thesis Hanhardt refers to was meant to account for longstanding social differences understood by many as rooted in essential racial distinctions.[19] It might be argued that such a discursive/reverse discursive dynamic can be seen in the pathologization of African American communities in the 1960s and 1970 in the sociological and popular literature on a so-called 'culture of poverty.'

The discursive/reverse discursive dynamic is observable in the fact that the idea of white supremacy having a harmful psychological/pathological impact upon African American communities might have *appeared* to some at the time as progressive, it ultimately re-inscribed older pathologized narratives to explain away the causes of racialized oppression.[20] If I make a similar argument regarding the elaboration of discourses of pathology in regards to queerness, it

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[18] Hanhardt, *Safe Space*, 112.

[19] That is, many people have perceived race to be a given dimension of human existence, as many have also viewed gender. Whatever imposed social or constructed aspects might exist, there has been a widely held view that race and gender constitute 'real' categories within the species. Indeed, that a person could be inherently and categorically incapable or inferior as an inborn characteristic attached to their race or gender has been central to both white supremacist and to patriarchal ideologies.

[20] On this see: Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967), cited in Hanhardt, *Safe Space*, 112; And also on this question, see: Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), Chapters One and Two especially.

nevertheless must be distinguished. The form in which the oppression of queers manifested involved understanding queer identity *not* as an inborn characteristic – not seen, that is, as comparable to gender or race – but as a perversity, a mistake, or a kind of sickness. The reverse discourse of queerness must be different in kind, because the originary discourse is so. I see the discourse of queer suicidality as a reversal of the discourse of homophobia which was itself a reversal of the originary discourse of queer pathology. This genealogy reveals the fact that the original dominant discourse of queer pathology is alive and well in contemporary queer identities and community.

The inclusionist strand of the LGBTQ movement may have appeared to have won the day, but what has *also* happened is that the liberationist narratives of queer exceptionalism are themselves implicated in those neoliberal constructions of identity which have allowed the inclusion of queers in to contemporary western societies.[21] There are two strands involved, one arising out the internal discourses of queerness and the other out of the external discourses of heteronormative neoliberalism. I will consider the implications of this intertwining of discourses of queerness both internal and external. A primary manifestation is in the tension which occurs when grass-roots organizing and disruptive forms of protest achieve the kind of successful social change being fought for. Then, there increasingly occurs a tension between the imperatives of activism and those of service provision.

Jane Ward has written about the increasing professionalization of queer culture and activism resulting from the very success of such activism in effecting change in mainstream society. Ward describes as a contestation among a non-professional queer activist tradition and

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[21] In her book, *Conflict Is Not Abuse*, Sarah Schulman engages complex questions concerning the role narratives of harm and safety have come to play in contemporary queer identity and community. The complexity of the issues Schulman addresses and the nuance with which she addresses them helped reveal to me the intertwined duality of the discourses involved in the construction of contemporary queer identity and community.

an increasingly professionalized cadre of queer activists, noting that while some of those involved in the movement were critical of the increasingly 'corporate' culture in LGBTQ organizing, for many others, "being impersonal and professional and modeling a corporate environment were valued means of increasing the legitimacy of the lesbian and gay movement."[22]

Sarah Schulman describes a similar dynamic also in the feminist movement where, "many initially radical movements in the 1960s and '70s soon became single-issue and reform-oriented, and moved into bureaucratic relationships to the government … [as the] enormous demand for feminist services like activist-run hotlines and rape crisis centers, and the expansion of service provision … [that] led to government funding, professionalization, and a bureaucratization."[23] This dynamic can be seen also in the success of New York based Housing Works, originally an ACT UP working group, and also in the transition of the radical politics of the queer youth movement towards a service-provision model.

In a recent book on queer youth culture, Mary Robertson describes the changes occurring in a queer youth drop-in space in a western U.S. city as the organization experienced an increase in funding and became able to expand in the services it provided. Describing the newly opened space as 'antiseptic' and 'unlived in,' Robertson notes that "the youth have been reluctant to make the switch to the new space." The youth for whom the space is intended it seems miss their old meeting space, with its "ratty old couches, graffiti-covered walls," and where they could enter "through a back door, so they didn't have to encounter any staff … if they didn't want

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[22] Jane Ward, *Respectably Queer: Diversity Culture in LGBT Activist Organizations* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008), 84. And, Ward's memorable example of this change: "In contrast with the creative and critical thinking skills required to invent a thirty-five foot phallic police barrier, professional skills and working relationships with authorities are now central to the production of pride events," Ward, *Respectably Queer*, 73.
[23] Sarah Schulman, *Conflict Is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2016), 83.

to."[24] The youth group I attended, B.A.G.L.Y. is still around today. Indeed it is thriving, as considered next to the rather bare-bones operation I remember. This is the result largely of its own success. As the state and non-profits began to direct funding to queer youth, some of it naturally flowed through already extant organizations. B.A.G.L.Y went from being a shoe-string youth support group to a much more sophisticated social service provider.

That the commodification of homosexuality – often involving the marketing of queerness to queers themselves – is a mechanism by which queer liberation has been co-opted is a familiar argument, one going back at least to John D'Emilio's 1983 essay on "Capitalism and Gay Identity."[25] It is interesting to conjecture that the field of service provision could constitute an aspect of such a marketing. Yet such a reading is suggested by interpreting queer discourses of safety as being reversals of earlier discourses of queer pathology.

The shift in the position of queers can ultimately only be understood in the context of the evolution of identity in neoliberal societies over the past decades. And, that the evolution of identity in neoliberal societies over the past decades can equally be elucidated through consideration of the shift in the position of queers. Towards these ends, I will attempt to position the queer youth movement in its historical context within the history of the larger LGBT movement. Then, I will turn directly to the queer youth movement of the early- to mid-1990s, and the event I have located as so crucial to this movement. Finally, I will make an effort at drawing out some of the implications of all this in the construction of contemporary queer identities and communities.

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[24] Mary Robertson, *Growing Up Queer: Kids and the Remaking of LGBTQ Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 34.
[25] John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* edited by Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, & Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983): 100-113.

A Genealogy

There is much of United States history which has been unremembered. The histories of women, of Indigenous peoples, and of African Americans constitute large swathes of history unremembered by many. Another aspect, which intersects these at many points, is the history of radical political movements and organizing.[26] Part of constructing a community is the telling by the community of its stories. In the 1970s the LGBTQ community in the United States began to tell its history, with the publication of works by Jonathan Ned Katz and Lilian Faderman among others. Another fairly early contribution to this effort was John D'Emilio's 1983 book on modern U.S. queer history, which records the influence of radical political organizing on the gay and lesbian movement in the early 1950s. Indeed, such politics have been central to most successful social movements in U.S. history. And, that the movement was targeted for attack through these connections is a fact shared also by the queer rights and other social movements. The history of early organizing for queer rights in the United States prefigured decades of tension between queer advocacies of inclusion and assimilation and more radical 'liberationist,' even separatist, ideologies.[27]

Even as the gay liberation movement gained strength and vitality throughout the 1970s, the exclusion of homosexuals from mainstream society helped guarantee the radical nature of this movement. And, as gay and lesbian communities achieved greater degrees of security and coherence, this was done largely outside the contours of mainstream society. Yet, while radical gay and lesbian liberationism in the 1970s may have embraced ideologies and practices as overt

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[26] For an overview of radical political and labor movements, see: Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper Collins, 1980).

[27] See, for instance: Amy Hequembourg and Jorge Arditi, "Fractured Resistances: The Debate over Assimilationism among Gays and Lesbians in the United States," *The Sociological Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (1999): 663-680; And, on the contestation among the Mattachine Society in the early 1950s between its radical foundations and those members committed to narratives of gay normalcy, see: John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 76-87.

sexual expressionism and separatism, there were many other queers advocating approaches more conservative and inclusionist.

When queers were excluded they were abject and, within this abjection, formed a multitude of identities, communities, and utopias. As Michael Warner put it, "Queers can be abusive, insulting, and vile toward one another, but *because abjection is understood to be the shared condition*, they also know how to communicate through such camaraderie a moving and unexpected form of generosity. No one is beneath its reach, not because it prides itself on generosity, but because it prides itself on nothing."[28] The AIDS crisis both decimated these utopias and also transformed queer communities as these reconstituted themselves to respond to AIDS.

The struggle against AIDS also transformed the relationship between LGBTQ identities and communities and the dominant society. This the result of the demands by queers for recognitions from the dominant society that the struggle entailed. The AIDS crisis forced the queer community to reframe its demands for recognition from the dominant society. As lesbian, gay, and trans communities came to work together and upon the main political stage, a sense of queer identity devastated by AIDS became replaced with a sense of queer identity forged through the work in struggle against it.

Beginning in the 1990s, gays and lesbians were increasingly brought into the mainstream, no longer excluded, no longer abject. This quickly resulted in the queer response, which objected to assimilationism and began to offer such challenges as queer negativity and queer pessimism.[29]

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[28] Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 35, emphasis added.

[29] On queer negativity, see: Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). On queer pessimism, see, for instance: Robert L. Caserio, Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz and Tim Dean, "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory," *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (2006): 819-828.

This canonical narrative remains today, wherein a duality between queerness and an increasingly mainstream LGBT identity is understood to exist. Whatever accuracy may be ascribed to this framing of the situation today, the dynamic involved in the evolution are complex. The queer youth Movement in Massachusetts in the early- to mid-1990s constituted itself not only through the discourses of LGBTQ communities, movements, organizing, and identities; but, also, through those of the increasingly potent neoliberal society in which these were situated.

It is necessary therefore, to comprehend something of the nature of each of these disparate sets of discourses, as well as the historical moment in which the movement occurred. Christina Hanhardt has observed that "[m]any historians and popular sources identity the period of the mid- to late 1970s … as a time by which both gay liberation and the homophile movement had faded from prominence. As a result, this period is mostly absent from LGBT movement history."[30] I am attempting in part to recover some of these connections, by looking at connections between the gay and lesbian youth movement of the early 1990s to queer political movements preceding and parallel to the AIDS crisis. For, even as the movement arose in the period of LGBTQ history most influenced by the AIDS crisis, it also was the inheritor of other traditions of queer activism.

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[30] Hanhardt, *Safe Space*, 84.

On Solidarity & Harm Reduction

In considering the queer youth movement it is necessary to realize the extent of the influence

exerted by the direction action approach of ACT UP upon any movement for LGBTQ rights in

the early 1990s. ACT UP's radicalism was a touchstone for the aspirations of a generation. To

understand the queer youth movement of the early 1990s requires placing it in this historical

context. The AIDS crisis led the queer community to reframe its demands for recognition from

the dominant society. As lesbian, gay, and trans communities came to work together and upon

the main political stage, a sense of queer identity devastated by AIDS became replaced with a

sense of queer identity forged through the work in struggle against it.

The AIDS epidemic in the United States is commonly understood to have begun in

1981.[31] For the next six years, the struggle against AIDS in the Unites States was largely waged

within the gay and lesbian community.[32] The year 1987 was a watershed in the struggle against

AIDS in the United States. In March 1987, activists came together in New York City to form the

direct action advocacy group ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power).[33] Up until the

early to mid-1980s, the gay and lesbian movement had largely constituted itself outside of

mainstream society. Much of their political organizing was to the point of being left alone by

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[31] Recent research has shown that AIDS had begun to spread in New York City during the 1970s, years earlier than previously had been thought: Nsikan Akpan, "America's HIV Outbreak started in this city, 10 years before anyone noticed," PBS Newshour (Oct. 26 2016), https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/america-hiv-outbreak-origins-nyc-gaetan-dugas; Michael Worobey, et al., "1970s and 'Patient 0' HIV-1 genomes illuminate early HIV/AIDS history in North America," *Nature* 539, Issue 7627 (Nov. 3, 2016): 98-101. The earliest mention of what came to be called AIDS was in June, 1981: Pneumocystis Pneumonia – Los Angeles, *CDC Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 30, no. 21 (June 5, 1981): 250, https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/1261.
[32] The organized response to the crisis within the gay and lesbian community began in July 1981, with the founding of the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), Susan M. Chambré, "The HIV/AIDS Grants Economy in New York City, 1983-1992," *Health Affairs* 15, no. 3 (1996): 251.
[33] Benita Roth, *The Life and Death of ACT UP/LA: Anti-AIDS Activism in Los Angeles from the 1980s to the 2000s* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 3.

mainstream society in order to pursue its own aims, not towards the object of being included or integrated within mainstream society.

Queers marching in the streets demanding political rights had always appeared radical and confrontational to many. Yet however public, much of this activism had been directed inward towards the community itself. The goal to strengthen queer community and to achieve self-sufficiency. The AIDS crisis changed this. On the one hand, the gay and lesbian community was incapable of addressing the AIDS crisis on its own, although they struggled mightily to do so given the lack of involvement by the institutions of mainstream society. On the other hand, the AIDS crisis and the lack of a sufficient wider social response to it let the gay and lesbian community to engage in an increasingly confrontational political activism directed at the mainstream society.

The direct action activism of the late 1980s and early 1990s by gays and lesbians in response to the AIDS crisis was directed not at the gay community but at the mainstream society. The gay and lesbian community began to make new political demands on the wider society, which involved the negotiation of a new relationship between queer community and that society. Yet this confrontational approach to political activism did not last. By the middle of 1993, the direct action activism which characterized the relationship between gay and lesbian activism around the AIDS crisis had dramatically waned.[34] The combination of the success of the direct action pressure upon government and changes in administration messaging around addressing AIDS and towards gay and lesbian citizens may have knocked the bottom out from under the direct action movement. Much of the waning of the movement was related to the internal dynamics of ACT UP and the queer community itself.

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[34] Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2009), 268.

In the early 1990s, parts of the queer community began to turn from their intense focus on activism surrounding HIV and AIDS. This left an opening for other discourses of queerness to gain in prominence. The AIDS crisis brought about fundamental transformations in queer communities. In the first place, it devastated many of the separatist communities which had been slowly constructed over the preceding decades. It also seriously interrupted more mainstream LGBTQ political projects, successors to the homophile movement.

The damage wrought by AIDS left a vacuum where vibrant communities had existed, it also led to the creation of new queer communities and queer social structures and opened the possibility for a dramatic reconfiguration of the relationship between the LGBTQ community and other marginalized communities. Yet while the AIDS crisis opened up space for the queer community to renew its struggle in solidarity with other oppressed communities, this was a possibility soon foreclosed.

The history of ACT UP is often told so as to center gay men, thus drawing a connection between gay sex and HIV. The campaign to change the diagnosis of AIDS to include the health experience of women, the 'Women Don't Get AIDS, They Just Die From It' campaign, and the campaign for needle exchange programs appeared to some within ACT UP as 'distractions' from ACT UP's central purpose. Yet the central purpose of ACT UP was to combat AIDS. Clearly the campaigns to combat AIDS among women and among intravenous drug users were central to the organization's mission.

There had long been a tension within the queer community between struggling in solidarity with other oppressed communities and an identarian approach which emphasized inclusionism over radicalism. The struggle against AIDS brought the LGBTQ community into solidarity with other oppressed communities. The struggle against AIDS was to provide needed

resources to people impacted by HIV/AIDS. Along with access to drugs and treatment, struggles for access to housing and to needle exchange programs were central to this work. ACT UP has largely been historicized as working mainly to advocate for the needs of gay men whose risk of contracting AIDS was primarily through unprotected sex. For this reason, the centrality of the battles over needle exchange have been largely elided.

After an early and largely unsuccessful trial needle exchange program, by the end of summer of 1990, "no official needle and syringe exchange operated in New York City."[35] Despite the devastation AIDS was wreaking on intravenous drug users, public officials ranged from wary to entirely opposed to needle exchange programs. Yet activists gave clean needles to people who needed them, although the government made it illegal.[36] ACT UP member Debra Levine recalls that when David Dinkins became mayor of New York in January 1990, his health commissioner ended the needle exchange trial begun in 1988.

It was at this time, Levine remembers, that ACT UP member Richard Elovich, together with needle-exchange activist Jon Parker, "started doing an underground needle exchange program."[37] ACT UP member Allan Clear remembers "it was Richard Elovich that came to the floor of ACT UP and talked about doing syringe exchange."[38] On March 6, 1990, eight activists, "members of the New York's AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power and the Boston-based National AIDS Brigade,"[39] were arrested during a needle exchange action in New York City. On June 25, 1991, Judge Laura Drager handed down an acquittal, accepting the defense argument of "justification by medical necessity." The activists acquitted on June 25, 1991 included ACT UP

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[35] Warwick Anderson, "The New York Needle Trial: The Politics of Public Health in the Age of AIDS," *American Journal of Public Health* 81, no. 11 (1991), 1514.
[36] Michel Marriott, "Needle Exchange Angers Many Minorities," *New York Times* (Nov. 7, 1988); Ronald Sullivan, "Yolanda Serrano, 45, Organizer of Anti-AIDS Needle Exchanges," *New York Times* (Oct. 22, 1993).
[37] Debra Levine, Interview with Sarah Schulman, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, 44.
[38] Allan Clear, Interview with Sarah Schulman, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, 20.
[39] Peg Byron, "Judge: AIDS activists justified," *UPI* (June 25, 1991).

members Rod Sorge, Dan Williams, Debra Levine, Gregg Bordowitz, Katherine Otter, Monica Pearl, and Richard Elovich. The arrest and trial together give a powerful example of ACT UP's direct activism and of the two-fold effect which characterized the success of the approach. Together with forcing change in government policy, the action engendered an increase in activist participation.

That some in ACT UP thought of needle-exchange programs or addressing the medical needs of women as outside the central mission of the organization appears connected to the conceptualization of ACT UP as a gay male organization. It may be that gay sex became seen as a legitimate way to contract HIV and HIV contracted through intravenous drug use as somehow less legitimate.[40] The gay male body became the normalized AIDS subject and AIDS became synonymous with a certain kind of gay male body. Gay white men had leveraged their social capital to force a re-evaluation of their identities, in a context in which gay male bodies were strongly identified with AIDS. Yet many resisted continuing the struggle so as to bring intravenous drug users into the epistemological space that had been carved out. Historicizing ACT UP through the lens of harm reduction does not disregard the centrality of treatment to the struggle, but it expands the story by addressing larger questions of who has access to resources as drugs and healthcare in the first place.

When ACT UP stepped back from the possibility of engaging in radical solidarity with other communities increasingly impacted by HIV/AIDS, it abandoned the possibility of constructing a more radical universal queer identity. The intense effort against AIDS led to that historical possibility, but a section of the movement declined to carry the struggle forward.

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[40] Christina Hanhardt explores such questions as these and the binary constructed between 'fags' and 'junkies' in: Christina B. Hanhardt, "Dead Addicts Don't Recover: ACT UP's Needle Exchange Program and the Subjects of Queer Activist History," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 24, no. 4 (2018): 421-444.

Benita Roth describes the 'demobilization' of the ACT UP movement in Los Angeles as taking place "over a period of five years, form the latter half of 1992 until late 1997."[41] Roth argues that the decline of ACT UP/LA was the result of a series of 'intersectional crises' which "tested the coalitional strings of interest that held the group together and weakened solidarity."[42] A survey of the interviews included in the ACT UP Oral History Project suggests a similar dynamic unfolding over the same time frame in New York.

The struggles described by Roth and in many of the interviews of the ACT UP Oral History Project represented a division within the organization over among those envisioning a more universal idea of queerness represented through broader coalitional struggle and those supporting a narrower identarian politics which sought entry into the halls of power and were willing to accept the offer of inclusion on the table. ACT UP declined because it proved unable to adopt the intersectional ideology which would have allowed it to grow. It was replaced by an apparently new expression of queer identity, in the queer youth movement. Yet the queer youth movement was successful not because it adopted such an approach or anti-normative ideology, but because it employed a reverse discourse of queer pathology.

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[41] Roth, *The Life and Death of ACT UP/LA*, 194.
[42] Roth, *The Life and Death of ACT UP/LA*, 96.

The Queer Youth Movement, A Case Study

On a November Thursday in 1991, a group of queer teenagers held a rally at the Massachusetts State House in Boston. One of the demonstrators was Sharon Bergman, a student at Concord Academy, a local private school. Sharon spoke of how being able to come out as bisexual in a supportive school environment had turned her away from thoughts of suicide. During the rally, "[a]bout 25 people staged a silent mass suicide along the main staircase of the Statehouse, holding cardboard razors or ropes around their necks."[43] This event constitutes a crux in the history of queer youth movement and as such provides a lens to understand both that which preceded and which followed from that moment.

Michel Foucault's genealogical method "requires the historian to go back in time until a difference is located."[44] That is, an event which witnesses the introduction of a new discourse. Such moments provide windows for the historian, where "identities and origins are done away with and become replaced by differences, displacements and beginnings."[45] The performance of queer suicidality by a group of high school student at the foot of the grand staircase in the Massachusetts State House that November day in 1991was such a 'difference.' An 'event' in which was introduced a new discourse through a "reversal of a relationship of forces" and an "appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it."[46] Revealing the historical course of events leading up to this moment, and the development of ideas surrounding this, allows us to see whether the performance was an inheritor of radical queer activism or of another and less radical tradition.

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[43] Associated Press, "Gay teens try lobbying."
[44] Mark Poster, "Foucault and History," *Social Research* 49, no. 1 (1982): 134.
[45] Bo Isenberg, "Habermas on Foucault Critical Remarks," *Acta Sociologica* 34, no. 4 (1991): 301. Habermas offers this analysis, in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, by way of rebuking Foucault's historical method.
[46] Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 154.

In the early 1990s a new queer youth movement arose in Massachusetts. There had been any number of LGBTQ youth organizations before this, but this movement was distinctive for several reasons. First, the movement framed itself in the context of public education. The youth based their claims for equality largely in their status as students, and the movement was organized within schools. Second, the movement was a substantially suburban one, gaining much of its earliest momentum in the well-off suburbs of Boston. Neither of these were characteristics common to earlier queer youth movements, which had been organized largely outside of secondary education environments and for the most part had flourished in urban spaces.

The characteristic of this movement which will be addressed here, and the one I contend is most important in understanding the success of this movement, is the developing discourse of queer suicidality which played such a prominent role in the rally of LGBTQ youth at the Massachusetts State House in the fall of 1991. This rally was the first in a series of public events which culminated two years later in the passage of the Gay and Lesbian Student Rights Law. I am particularly interested in the relationship between the sets of political claims made by the youth at this rally, and the success of the movement it commenced.

The November 1991 rally was the opening salvo in what would become the 'Safe Schools' movement. The Safe Schools movement in Massachusetts transformed the educational landscape in that state for LGBTQ youth and was the spark of what became a national movement. The most prominent feature of this movement, in many schools, is the student Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) group. Because the November 1991 State House rally is the first public expression of what became the Safe Schools and Gay-Straight Alliance movements, the enactment of mass suicide at the event is of particular significance.

I argue that tracing the genealogy of the protest at the Massachusetts State House on November 14, 1991 can reveal influences other than those coming from queer youths themselves on the development of this suicide and safety discourse. It was a radical act for a teenaged high school student to come out publicly as gay or lesbian in 1992. It was also a radical act for a public school teacher to come out. And it was a radical act for queer adults and youth to come together to advocate for expanding gay and lesbian civil rights. We see in the action at the State House that day an adoption of the kind of direct action protest made prominent by ACT UP. Yet we also see, I would argue, a redeployment of a discourse of pathology which had adhered to homosexuality for decades. The message was a radical one, but the discursive strategy adopted was not. This can be explained by reference to the alternate genealogy I have described here. This would appear to indicate a co-option of both the energies of these queer youth and of the historical moment.

In the fall of 1991, when the State House rally occurred, there were four high-school based gay youth groups in the state of Massachusetts. Project 10 East at Cambridge Rindge and Latin, founded in 1988,[47] Concord Academy, founded fall 1988,[48] Phillips Andover Academy, founded fall 1989,[49] and Newton South High School, founded fall 1991,[50] just a couple of months before this action at the State House. Five years later, there existed over one hundred GSAs in public high schools in Massachusetts.[51] The historical distinctiveness of this fact

[47] The History Project, "Massachusetts Youth Pride Timeline," *Millennium Rainbow Youth History Exhibition*, 2009.

[48] Kevin Jennings, *Mama's Boy, Preacher's Son: A Memoir of Growing Up, Coming Out, and Changing America's Schools* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 177.

[49] Stephen Lane, *No Sanctuary: Teachers and the School Reform that Brought Gay Rights to the Masses* (Lebanon NH: University Press of New England, 2019), 118.

[50] Newton Talks, An oral history project for the city of Newton, https://guides.newtonfreelibrary.net/newtontalks, interview with Robert Parlin conducted April 11, 2019, https://archive.org/details/NT_PARLR.

[51] Gay and Lesbian Student Resource Guide 1997-1998, Massachusetts Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, https://archive.org/details/gaylesbianstuden00gard/mode/2up.

suggests that the tactics, rhetoric and self-understanding of the gay and lesbian youth movement in the early 1990s formed an essential aspect of transformations occurring in the queer rights movement more broadly during these years.

Cambridge's Project 10 East was only "the second in-school support youth program" for gay and lesbian youth in the United States.[52] The first was Project 10 in Los Angeles, founded in 1984. Project 10 East had, like its earlier model, been initially "intended primarily to support gay, lesbian, and bisexual students."[53] I began this paper wondering why student non-curricular gay/straight alliances had achieved such prominence in place of the early identity based models, as those offered in the Project 10 initiatives. Exploring this question led me to look to the origin of the name, 'gay-straight alliance.'

Kevin Jennings, a teacher at Concord Academy, cofounded that school's gay-straight alliance along with a student. Jennings records it was this student who suggested the name. Faith, a straight-identified freshman, came into Jennings' office a couple of weeks after he had delivered a coming out speech in front of the whole school and declared she wanted to "start a club to do something about homophobia at the school." Jennings asked if she had a name in mind for the club, and recalls her responding, "I dunno … But since you're gay and I'm straight, why don't we call it the Gay-Straight Alliance."[54] Jennings writes that the following morning during announcements, "Faith and her best friend strode onto the stage" and announced, "We're starting a new club to fight homophobia in our school, and it's called the Gay-Straight Alliance … Everybody is welcome to come."[55] This appears to be the first such group at a high school in the

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[52] Larry Aaronson, "On Teaching Howard Zinn," *Repercussions & Reflections*, February 26, 2011, http://blogs.umb.edu/joinercenter/2011/02/26/teaching_howard_zinn/comment-page-1/.

[53] Warren J. Blumenfeld, "'Gay/Straight' Alliances: Transforming Pain to Pride," *The High School Journal* 77, no. ½ (1993-1994): 119.

[54] Jennings, *Mama's Boy*, 176.

[55] Jennings, *Mama's Boy*, 177.

United States. It is clear from the historical record and timeline that this group influenced the formation of Phillips Andover's student group the following year, and that the model developed in these two private schools in turn influenced the founding of the group at Newton South High School, the first of many thousand GSAs in public schools across the country today.

Despite the recalled spontaneity of a young student generating the name on the spot in 1988, this was not the first time the expression 'gay-straight alliance' had been used for a school based LGBTQ student group. I found record of a 'Gay-Straight Alliance' at the University of Maine at Orono in the late 1970s.[56] And, in 1983, the 'Gay-Straight Alliance'[57] of Bates College in Lewiston Maine caused a minor uproar with their plan to stage a protest against military recruitment on campus. According to the article, the protest was called off due to an "outburst of anti-gay sentiment."[58] Yet this was not the end of the Bates affair, as the *Boston Globe* reported in an extensive article a couple weeks later.

The Bates College Gay-Straight Alliance and its supporters staged a sit-in of about 100 people on March 2 1983 to protest military recruitment at the college. Although, "half a dozen law schools, including those at Boston College and Harvard, ban military recruiters because of the their discriminatory practices against homosexuals"[59] the article observes that, were Bates to adopt such a policy, it would be the first undergraduate college in the country to do so. Further, the article notes that "campaigns are being waged at the undergraduate colleges of Harvard and New York University to bar armed forces recruiters."[60]

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[56] *Bangor Daily News*, May 8, 1978, p. 6.
[57] Referred to also as the college's 'GSA,' see note following.
[58] Jon Fleming, "Reactionary Fears Shut Off Debate at Maine College," *Hartford Courant*, Feb. 27, 1983.
[59] Louis Berney, "Values controversy marches in at Bates," *Boston Globe*, March 6, 1983.
[60] Ibid.

It seems unlikely that Jennings, who attended Harvard during the period of the Bates protests, and was certainly aware of, if not involved with, Harvard's Gay Student Association,[61] would have not been aware of the anti-recruitment activism of the college's gay student group. My interest is not simply in the accuracy of Jennings' recollection here. Certainly the gist of his remembrance, the central role of student initiative and leadership in founding the school based youth groups of the early GSA movement, has a great deal of truth to it. What most interests me here is the *genealogy* of the event. Connecting the movement of high school based Gay-Straight Alliances in Massachusetts to earlier LGBTQ activism may reveal historical connections which help to explain the discursive turn to queer suicidality.

The demands made upon the queer community by the AIDS crisis along with the success of ACT UP's radical activism might obscure other efforts within the broader gay community during the 1980s towards achieving equality for LGBTQ individuals. The 1983 Bates college Gay-Straight Alliance protest against military recruitment on campus may be understood as such a parallel effort. The *Boston Globe* report on the Bates College sit-in noted it was the first political demonstration on the college's campus since the end of the Vietnam War. Yet, the protest "was not about war or armament policy. It was over the college's practice of allowing the military, which does not accept homosexuals, to recruit on campus."[62]

This was a precursor to the gays in the military movement which achieved traction at the same time the gay and lesbian youth movement was ramping up in Massachusetts. In June 1993, the same month in which Newton South High School's Gay-Straight Alliance marched for the first time in Boston's Gay Pride Parade, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell, was protested over the ban on gays serving in the U.S. military as he delivered a speech at

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[61] Jennings, *Mama's Boy*, 119.
[62] Berney, "Values controversy".

Harvard University's commencement.[63] A few weeks later, the New York Times reported that

the president had decided to accept the Department of Defense's 'don't ask, don't tell" approach

for "a limited lifting of restrictions on homosexuals in the military."[64] With the onset of the

AIDS crisis, the most potent capacities of LGBTQ communities had turned to adopt radical

tactics as necessary to fight the existential threat. The devastation of the AIDS crisis re-oriented

political activism in the gay community and forced a confrontation with this society. Yet it is

clear that there existed also parallel movements of LGBTQ political and social activism during

the 1980s and into the early 1990s.

      While appearing to be a movement strongly influenced by, and which continued to carry

on, the radical activism of ACT UP, the queer youth movement of the early- to mid-1990s in fact

in many ways represented a resurgence of the more moderate and inclusionist strand of LGBTQ

activism and organizing. In taking up this mantle, the queer youth movement's discourse of

safety helped to construct a contemporary model of queer identity and community, one deeply

implicated in traditional pathological conceptions of homosexuality.

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[63] Campus Journal, "Balloons of Protest for Powell at Harvard," *New York Times*, June 9, 1993.
[64] Thomas L. Friedman, "Clinton Is Said to Accept Parts of Plan on Gay Ban," *New York Times*, July 16, 1993.

Clinicization & Contemporary Queer Identity

It has been shown that the queer youth movement which came to prominence in Massachusetts in the early 1990s was influenced by both the more radical approach of ACT UP and the more inclusionist approaches which had paralleled this. Yet even the apparently radical approach of ACT UP was rooted in a queer identarianism which ultimately limited the scope of its ambition and prevented it from engaging in solidarity of struggle with other oppressed communities. Intertwined with these discourses internal to queer communities the gay and lesbian youth movement was equally nourished by the discourses of a neoliberal society which were then proliferating. These together constitute the sets of discourses which provided both the content with which the queer youth movement could construct itself and the horizons of possibility within which it could do so.

The two dominant heteronormative social discourses surrounding homosexuality were silence and invisibility on the one hand and pathologization on the other. That is, either homosexuality did not and could not exist, or that it was some kind of disease or perversion. Of these, the first continued to dominate the lived experience of many queers, while the second had become elaborated in the professional literature in the post-war twentieth-century.

Alongside and in communication with these dominant heteronormative discourses, there increasingly came to exist discourses of gay identity and community constructed by queer individuals and within queer communities themselves. By the 1970s these counter-discourses had more and more successfully challenged the dominant discourses of silence and pathology. These counter-discourses were multiple, especially characterized by gendered differences, as lesbian and gay, and also by a split between the more radical and more accommodationist approaches to LGBTQ equality.

ACT UP's turn away from the harm reduction narrative reflected the rejection of a politics of radical solidarity on the part of the most powerful segment of the LGBTQ community and one whose radicalism in the 1980s was embodied in the response to the AIDS crisis. The nature of ACT UP's radicalism lay in the group's synthesis of the traditions of radical queer activism with the demands of inclusion which had generally characterized more moderate appeals for queer equality. This synthesis occurred largely out of necessity. Yet as a result of this synthesis of discourses within the queer community, together with ACT UP's tremendous success, and with the shifts occurring in the dominant social discourses around homosexuality, a new movement for LGBT rights began to achieve rapid and remarkable success in the early- to mid-1990s. Three decades on, the pace of the change wrought by this movement appears only to have increased.

The discourse which won the day, and which became that of the mainstream LGBTQ rights movement, contains an interweaving of several elements. First, the re-alignment of queerness within the dominant heteronormative society which resulted from AIDS, and the queer response to this re-alignment. Second, the range of ACT UP's political claims, including the abandonment of the most radical of these, harm reduction, and the possibilities of solidarity it offered. And third, the assimilationist impulses which had always existed alongside radical queer liberationism. All these were interwoven through the medium of the discourse of pathology. This became possible through the rejection of harm reduction, in the failure of the queer community to reclaim and expand upon its earlier radicalism. And, also, because the discourse of pathology was so available and easily understood in relation to queerness. Even for queers, our queerness was made easily intelligible through the discourse of pathology, or its reversal.

There is of course a historical discourse surrounding homosexuality, in which queerness is seen or understood as a sort of physical aberration and/or a psychological illness. John D'Emilio among others has discussed the centrality of pathologization to mainstream discourses of homosexuality.[65] And Sarah Schulman has more recently pointed out the extent to which contemporary depictions continue to present queers either as pathologized or as ultimately to be punished for their queerness.[66]

The discourse of queer pathology had fit quite easily in the mid-twentieth century with the criminalization of homosexuality and gender non-conformity, along with the invisibility equally imposed upon these. Yet it may seem surprising that the discourse of queer pathology would continue to survive so intact given the tremendous changes in the social position of queers which have taken place.

One reservoir of the discourse of pathologization in queer identity and community is familial homophobia. An effect of the discourse of invisibility as much as of pathology, the experience of feeling the need to hide oneself in the spaces which are ideally meant to offer shelter and protection has been formative for generations of queers. This experience is at the center of queer identity also inasmuch as queer communities exist as a kind of diaspora. Fled from familial shores, yet not thereby free their effects. "Historically, gay people have tried to protect themselves by retreating into subculture and/or relationships. But even these structures are often not able to resist particularly venomous onslaughts by family and society … the subculture and the romantic relationship itself can therefore become an instrument of the larger structures of cruelty."[67] The tenacity and changeability of these influences upon queer identity

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[65] D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 15-19, 140-42, et passim.
[66] Sarah Schulman, *Ties That Bind: Familial Homophobia and Its Consequences* (New York: The New Press, 2009), 21-22.
[67] Schulman, *Ties That Bind*, 15.

and community illustrate both the potency of discursive formation and also the need to take these into account in an attempt to comprehend historical and social change. Despite this fact, with the rise of queer visibility new discourses did arise.

The AIDS crisis had a contradictory effect on this process. In the first place, it was destructive on an almost unimaginable scale. In the second place, the response of the queer community was generative and world forming, even if this response ultimately failed in the fullness of its radical promise. Yet AIDS also reinscribed the discourse of pathology upon homosexuality in a way that perhaps no other course of historical events could have done. Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed offer an account of the dynamics involved in this re-pathologization:

> illness proof positive that the afflicted have lurked in the dark dens of perversion, relinquishing all claims to compassion, comprehension, or credibility. Under pressure from AIDS activists and critics who challenged this narrative of blame, the story shifted from individual "victims" to the practices of sexual culture more generally, a supposedly less cruel because more abstract gesture. Even if individual gay men were not genetically or psychologically programmed for self-destruction, this story goes, the culture these men produced, centered on reckless perversion and unthinking abandon, contained the seeds of death and dissolution. A morbid and pathologizing essentialism is thus displaced from individuals to the collective.[68]

The earlier discourse of pathology attached to homosexuality had become untenable in the face of decriminalization and the rise of queer visibility. Yet that originary pathological discourse remained extant in the reverse pathological discourses of homophobia and in the complex interactions among gay identity and experience within the AIDS crisis. In the 1990s, the reverse discourse of pathologization through the lens of queer liberationism/inclusionism and inflected

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[68] Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed, "Battles Over the Gay Past: De-generation and the Queerness of Memory," in *If Memory Serves: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Promise of the Queer Past* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 47 .

by the AIDS crisis became elaborated as a discourse of safety. I term this, the clinicization of contemporary queer identity.

When in the early 1990s, parts of the queer community began to turn from their intense focus on activism surrounding HIV and AIDS. This left an opening for other discourses of queerness to gain in prominence. Whatever the intention: whether to carry forward the radical banner of ACT UP, or to return to an earlier assimilationist model; whether the cause be gay youth, or gays in the military; it seems these new discourses could not avoid the trap of reimagining queerness through the mechanism of turning back to and reformulating earlier medical discourses of queer pathology.

This is obscured as the articulation of LGBTQ identities and demands at that time appeared to *reverse* dominant discourses of queerness. As David Halperin describes it, 'reverse discourses' constructed to reject heteronormativity only recapitulate "the sexual terms, categories, and concepts of the pathologizing medical and psychological discourses to which it opposes itself."[69] The basic function of any discourse is to exert control over people without the direct application of state force, allowing people and communities to construct identities which reinforce, even while seeming to reject, the normative demands of the society in which they are embedded.

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[69] Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, 58.

Queer Discourses of Safety

I have dwelled upon the concept of discourses both because it can be a somewhat opaque one and because it is important to the contribution I would like to make to the state of knowledge in the field of LGBTQ history. I am guided in this contribution by the work of Christian Hanhardt and Sarah Schulman, and the ways in which each has expanded upon the idea of safety as it exists in interrelation with queer communities and queer identity. According to Hanhardt, "[t]he idea that the ever-present risk of victimization is intrinsic to gay experience became common within gay subcultures during the 1980s and 1990s … [as] activists increasingly thought the threat of violence unified diverse individuals as they adopted shared, public gay and lesbian identities."[70]

The discourse of suicidality within which the queer youth movement framed its demands served to constitute queer youth as intelligible citizens exactly because it presented their queerness through the prism of pathology. First homosexuality had been pathologized. Then, increasingly homophobia. Now, it is the response of queer youth to the homophobia which is pathologized. This reveals, through application of Foucault's genealogical approach, a discursive "appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it."[71] The discourse of queer suicidality re-attached pathology to the queer individual, through the mechanism of the trauma of homophobia.

Also, as a result of the AIDS crisis, there had been a retrenchment of the sense of homosexuality as inescapably pathological. This false rebirth of a queer youth subject in the shadow of the AIDS catastrophe was a central component of the increasingly intimate association of LGBTQ identity and neoliberal articulations of identity wherein it remains the

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[70] Hanhardt, *Safe Space:*, 155-156.
[71] See footnotes 6 & 45, above.

queers who ultimately remain needing to be saved. Queerness understood as constituting an experience of trauma, not freedom. Mari Ruti expresses the dynamic involved where, "in keeping with the individualistic principles of neoliberalism, the rhetoric of safety – and particularly the rhetoric of taking responsibility for our own well-being – turns the pursuit of health into a personal obligation."[72] The clinicization of contemporary queer identity is a reverse discourse of queer pathologization which presents the queer individual to themselves as constantly in need of repair and which is the result of the influence of neoliberal structurings of identity in dialectic with discourses of queerness both internal to and external to queer communities.

The fact must be observed that queer youth in the early 1990s were themselves the central actors in this history. The young people at the center of this particular story did not lack for agency in their political choices, especially as the GSA movement began within some of the most privileged towns and schools in the country. The discourse of safety has a different set of resonances for queer young people not so positioned. The new queer youth movement in Massachusetts, through the Safe Schools initiative, articulated a discourse of queerness fully situated within an arising neoliberal conception of 'sexual citizenship.'[73]

As a structural means of bringing previously excluded sexual minorities within society's compass, sexual citizenship excludes as many people as it may include. There is a relationship between the queer attachment to safety, assimilationism, and exclusion. Tim Dean observed that "[the] rhetoric of safety exploits our terror of the unfamiliar in the service of consolidating class

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[72] Mari Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theory's Defiant Subjects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 29.
[73] Ana Luisa Liguori and Marta Lamas, "Gender, Sexual Citizenship and HIV/AIDS," *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 5, no. 1 (2003): 87-90; Serena Bassi, "Tick as Appropriate: (A) Gay, (B) Queer, or (C) None of the Above: Translation and Sexual Politics in Lawrence Venuti's *A Hundred Strokes of the Brush Before Bed*," *Comparative Literature Studies* 51, no. 2 (2014): 302-303.

hierarchies, maintaining racial segregation, and intensifying xenophobia."[74] Attaching the narrative of queer liberation to the rhetoric of safety helped to build those structures which continue to maintain inequality in contemporary U.S society.

Jodi Dean is known for developing the critical framework of 'communicative capitalism,' which is very useful in illuminating the manner in which individuals in contemporary neoliberal societies actively participate in those societies structures of social control.[75] In a more recent work, Dean has offered a critique of what she describes as, "two opposing tendencies dominant in contemporary left theory and activism … the opposition between survivors and systems."[76] In such a paradigm, queers might come to understand themselves as survivors of homophobia existing within the domain of the dominant society, rather than as subjects freed by participation in queer subcultures.

It is impossible I think to explain the prevalence of various discourses of safety in the queer imaginary over the past three decades without appreciating the fact that in the early- to mid-1990s a synthesis of queer and neoliberal discourses of identity occurred, which produced not only a form of contemporary queer identity but also contributed massively to the ongoing articulation of identity more generally in neoliberal societies. That performance of an act of suicidality in the context of a political demonstration by an assembly of queer youth in the fall of 1991 embraces the fullness of these discourses and translates them into a constructed identity and program of action which carried the queer youth movement forward to tremendous success over the succeeding decade.

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[74] Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 190, quoted in Mari Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out*, 29.

[75] Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism & Left Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

[76] Jodi Dean, *Comrade: An Essay on Political Belonging* (New York: Verso, 2019), 11-12. Whatever else, LGBTQ organizing and advocacy certainly can be regarded as existing within the ambit of 'left theory and activism.'

The distinction I draw between this discourse of safety and those elaborated upon by Hanhardt and Schulman is the direct, if reversed, relationship between the discourse of queer suicidality and earlier discourses of queer pathology. This distinction also helps explain the tremendous success of the queer youth movement.

Reflexive Speculation

On a Sunday afternoon in early 1994 I sat in the basement of an Episcopal church on the backside of Boston's Beacon Hill. The space was the home of B.A.G.L.Y, the Boston Alliance of Gay and Lesbian Youth, and I was in a meeting of the youth-led group's steering committee.[77] We had just voted to re-instate the male/female co-presidency and I recall the sense of surprise that was expressed at the outcome of the vote. The initial attempt at a male/female co-presidency had not gone well, and there seemed considerable reluctance on the part of a number of the steering committee's members to re-attempt it so soon. The vote, unlike most of the business we conducted, was private, and we wrote our preference down on slips of paper. The vote was close, and while I cannot be certain of this I had the impression that mine may well have been the deciding vote. While I had at first been swayed by the vocal concerns of those who had reservations concerning the co-presidency. My feeling shifted when it became obvious that all of the women on the committee – including the female adult advisor who contributed to the conversation but who, like the other two adult advisors, had no vote – spoke in favor of the co-presidency. I realized that although I might have an opinion on the issue, that also there was clearly some dimension of the issue which myself did not or perhaps could not fully appreciate given my experience, and which I might only be able to ascertain through listening to the thoughts of people with experiences other than my own.

This recollection was brought to mind while reading Jane Ward's account of the transformations which took place in the leadership of the Los Angeles Pride Parade in her book, *Respectably Queer*. Ward describes "the rise of a New Left" which while "focused on cultural expression, identity-based rights, and mainstream inclusion" is "simultaneously supportive of

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[77] The steering committee had a voting membership of 8-10 youth elected bi-annually by the membership, along with the the director and two adult advisors as non-voting members.

global capitalism." This leads, according to Ward, to a culture which is both committed to 'diversity' and also increasingly 'impersonal and professional.'[78] Reading Ward's experience of the effect which this had at the organizational level made me wonder what the conversation about that decision would look like today.

In thinking back to my time as a member of B.A.G.L.Y., I wonder at the extent to which the membership experienced it as a white space. Having grown up myself in a rural part of a very white predominantly Catholic largely working class town, B.A.G.L.Y. felt to me the most diverse space I had ever inhabited. I think about the youth involved, the friends I made and the many people I met and worked with and came to know. And I wonder to what extent we were constructing a white and middle-class culture in a space which had been more diverse and with a working class sensibility. I also think about the extent to which B.A.G.L.Y was the exact opposite of the kind of professional and 'impersonal' spaces Ward describes encountering in twenty-first century queer activist and non-profit spaces. I recall my ability to listen that day and that it was my presence in that space with those people in messy and contentious communion that taught me how to listen. And I wonder at how such transformative listening happens now, when the communities we built have become so deeply implicated in the structures of the larger society we were trying then to escape.

Part of what has motivated me to pursue the questions I have addressed herein is a hope to better understand my relationship to my own social position and how that has changed over time, and, particularly, how the radical nature of the position that I found myself in in my youth might offer insights into how people more generally can come to view with more accuracy the ways in which people in different positions can and do experience the reality we all coexist in.

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[78] Ward, *Respectably Queer*, 7. Also see footnote 21, above.

The clinicization of contemporary queer identity can be seen in the professional model of providing services to queer youth, very different from the model that existed during my own youth. Clearly this has many benefits. My interest in what may have been lost is not, I hope, impelled by a sense of nostalgia for the past only. This paper is in many ways a reflection on my own personal and political journey. Even in the early 1990s, being a white male homosexual was not a particularly disenfranchised social position. Yet being a homosexual youth *was* a radical social position, or at least it felt like one.

On the one hand of course there is the simple assumption of youth which is always that they are not professionals. So, to the extent that the project is actually being directed or driven forward by the youth themselves, then it most remain chaotic, DIY, non-professional, and hence, traditionally queer. Also, the observable tendency of youth to sometimes challenge the status quo may tend to allow even youth of relative privilege the possibility of becoming deeply radicalized. As Michael Warner notes 'youth-culture' and 'artistic publics' may sometimes "operate as counterpublics, even though many who participate in them are 'subalterns' in no other sense."[79] It is my strong sense that at the time, and to a significant extent still today, queer youth exist by definition in a transgressive space. There existed no option for them to be normalized, given the social meanings of queerness and of youth, so that we therefore *had* to be radical. In existing at all, we existed radically.

I have argued that the elaboration of the category of queer youth forms part of the redefinition of queerness in relation to the heteronormative society. It seems likely that the youth movement suggested itself as amenable ground for the introduction of a queer discourse of safety

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[79] Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 57.

because the idea of protecting children allowed for the introduction of that discourse.[80] In place

of the urge to cast queer children out of the family, there increasingly developed an impulse to

keep them within. This was the result of two historical developments. First, the continued growth

of middle-class social values in the midst of an expanding neoliberalism altered the social

position of adolescents and the relationship between families and their offspring. And, as the

result of queer activism, the socially abject position of queers had altered sufficiently that the

need to outwardly shun queer family members diminished apace.

The recognition that some young people were going to come out as queer together with a

growing reluctance to exclude these young people from the family – or, for the young people

themselves to reject the family in favor of queer community – made it necessary to reframe the

position of the queer adolescent. And, this provided a strategic opening that queer activists were

unlikely to pass over.

In his book on the Safe Schools Movement in Massachusetts, Stephen Lane discusses the

relationship between gay rights activist David LaFontaine and Massachusetts' socially liberal

Republican governor Bill Weld. According to Lane, after Weld's narrow defeat of the

conservative Democratic candidate John Silber in the 1990 gubernatorial election, "LaFontaine,

who helped deliver the gay vote … showed Weld a copy of the 1989 HHS report, and said

simply, 'Do something to help these kids.'"[81] That report was the four volume *Report of the

Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide* produced by the U.S. Department of Health and Human

Services which contained a chapter titled "Gay Male and Lesbian Youth Suicide" in the third

volume. David LaFontaine would be appointed the chair of the Governor's Commission on Gay

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[80] In terms of moving mainstream opinion, arguments for increasing the safety of homosexuals more broadly would likely have gained less purchase and met with less success.
[81] Stephen Lane, *No Sanctuary*, 151.

and Lesbian Youth created by Weld in 1992, and Weld would sign the 'Gay and Lesbian Student Rights Bill' into law after it was passed by the state legislature the following year.

Together with a number of other youth, I worked with David on the lobbying effort to secure passage of that bill. At the time it all felt a part of a single movement. Whether sitting around in a church basement creating queer youth community together, or running around the corridors of the state house talking about being gay and lesbian youth, or traveling to high schools together and speaking in front of classrooms and sometimes auditoriums full of students. These were all part and parcel of my experience of the queer youth movement. In retrospect however, I can see more clearly the differences in the discourses of queerness we enacted in these several spaces.

The question raised however is the extent to which the discourse of suicidality arose from the experiences and demands of the youth themselves, or whether it was introduced or imposed. In 1992, when at seventeen I began attending meetings of B.A.G.L.Y., the discussions we had were about the freedom we found in our queerness. We talked about becoming free, because that was how we felt. Coming together was the source of our liberation, and that liberation was what interested us the most. It wasn't always necessary to talk about our experiences of oppression, because we knew that we all already understood. This commonality was the basis for a sense of joyful solidarity. Freedom was rooted in truth. Our oppression had been manifest through a lie. And, the truth was for us the far more interesting and exceptionally immediate fact.

Conclusions

> *Numerous poststructuralist critics and theorists – aligned with feminism, cultural studies, and gay and lesbian studies – have in turn advocated some form of alliance between constructionism and essentialism, or between antihumanist theory and humanist claims and practices.*[82]

> *We must be aware of ... the tendency to reduce being gay to the questions: "Who am I?" and "What is the secret of my desire?." Might it not be better if we asked ourselves what sort of relationships we can set up, invent, multiply or modify through our homosexuality? The problem is not trying to find out the truth of one's sexuality within oneself, but rather, nowadays, trying to use our sexuality to achieve a variety of different types of relationships. And this is why homosexuality is probably not a form of desire, but something to be desired. We must therefore insist on becoming gay, rather than persist in defining ourselves as such.*[83]

It is a central tenet of LGBTQ studies that 'gay' and 'lesbian' or other identities arising out of sexual or emotional desires or practices are thoroughly modern constructs. Feminist theorist Sara Ahmed notes that "the idea of 'having' a sexual orientation, where 'having' is translated into a form of being, is a modern idea."[84] That such identities are constructed of course does not make them any less real. Conceiving queer identity as constructed, "does not quite explain the ways in which sexual orientation can be felt as inherent and bodily or even as essential. It does not explain how orientations can feel 'as if' they come from inside and move us out toward objects and others." To account for this, Ahmed says, "we need to produce explanations of how orientations can operate simultaneously as effects and be lived or experienced as if they are originary or a matter of how one's body inhabits the world, or by being orientated toward one side, like being right or left handed."[85] Ahmed's description echoes the sentiments expressed in

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[82] Amanda Anderson, *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 209.

[83] Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Lifestyle: An Interview with Michel Foucault," *Gai Pied* (April 1981): 4, quoted in Ed Cohen, "Who Are 'We'? Gay 'Identity' as Political (E)motion (A Theoretical Rumination)," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 88.

[84] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 69. On sexual identities as modern social constructs, also see: John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 4.

[85] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 80.

the two epigraphs offered at the opening of this conclusion. In considering the history and significance of the queer youth movement, I am always already brought back to questions of identity in both their broadest and most particular instances.

Queerness is a more recent construction even than such homosexual identities as gay and lesbian, existing in the froth at the edge of modernity in a fashion perhaps unique. It is not a fixed static category based in a determinative sexual nature, but a performative construct arising out of the intersection of certain material conditions within modernity. Its novelty may give queerness some transparency which makes it instructive for understanding identity more broadly. People use identity as a way of making sense of their political claims and shared social terrains. Homosexuals have had their position in social power relations change more rapidly than any other identity group one can easily bring to mind. To the extent that queerness has seen such a rapid transformation in its political and social positions, understanding the ways in which it is constructed and enacted may be useful for understanding the political fortunes and social positions of other identities also.

Within LGBTQ community and identities, there is a close relationship between the claiming of a queer identity and the theorizing of this identity. This suggests the origins of the word's popularity in the realms both of social movement and theory. Queerness describe simultaneously an identity rooted in lived and bodily experience and the sets of theoretical and political claims which have been elaborated around this identity. The relationship between queer identity and queer theory is additionally complicated by the contestations concerning the nature of queerness as an identity. To a significant degree in fact, queerness is defined by this very history of contested-ness.

The word queer is both descriptive of a material and constructed 'field of identity' and also is understood as describing sets of sexual or other practices which serve to disrupt heteronormative or otherwise hegemonic social structures. Indeed:

> Judith Halberstam has argued that in a time of increasing lesbian and gay assimilationism, "queer subjects" might be redefined as those who "live (deliberately, accidentally, or of necessity) during the hours when others sleep and in the spaces (physical, metaphysical, and economic) that others have abandoned," including, "ravers, club kids, HIV-positive barebackers, rent boys, sex workers, homeless people, drug dealers, and the unemployed." Queer, in this model, is less about same-sex practices than about a way of life that defies the rules of normative, respectable adult citizenship.[86]

It seems that defining a network of relationships, set of practices, or way of life as queer entirely inasmuch as these involve a rejection of dominant norms or social practices avoids the most important element of queer subversity. That is, the extent to which same-sex sexual practices and romantic relationships involve a rejection of hegemonic gender roles. Given these lie so central to the dominant power relations in modern society, it is this aspect of queerness which I suggest is the most radicalizing. I would argue that practices such as clubbing or experiences such as unemployment would fall short of constituting queerness without that these similarly undermine hierarchical gender relations. Of course, it may be equally the case that neither same-sex sex nor gay romance any longer challenge the gendered social hegemony either. In which case, queer subjects may continue to become increasingly scarce.

If this were true, then it would form a strange coda to the world building we imagined ourselves to be engaged in. We thought, not just that we were advancing a cause, but that we were upending the very order of things. The word queer signified for us this ambition, towards a complete break with the structures they had tried and failed to impose upon us. The specific

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[86] Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 10; quoted in Jane Ward, *Respectably Queer*, 60.

content we ourselves gave to the word queer may have constituted both its strength and perhaps also its ultimate vulnerability. As observed by Linda Alcoff, our historical location, however specific and necessary, "is both a limit on what we can see and that which allows us to see anything at all."[87]

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[87] Linda Martín Alcoff, *Real Knowing: New Versions of the Coherence Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 29-30.

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