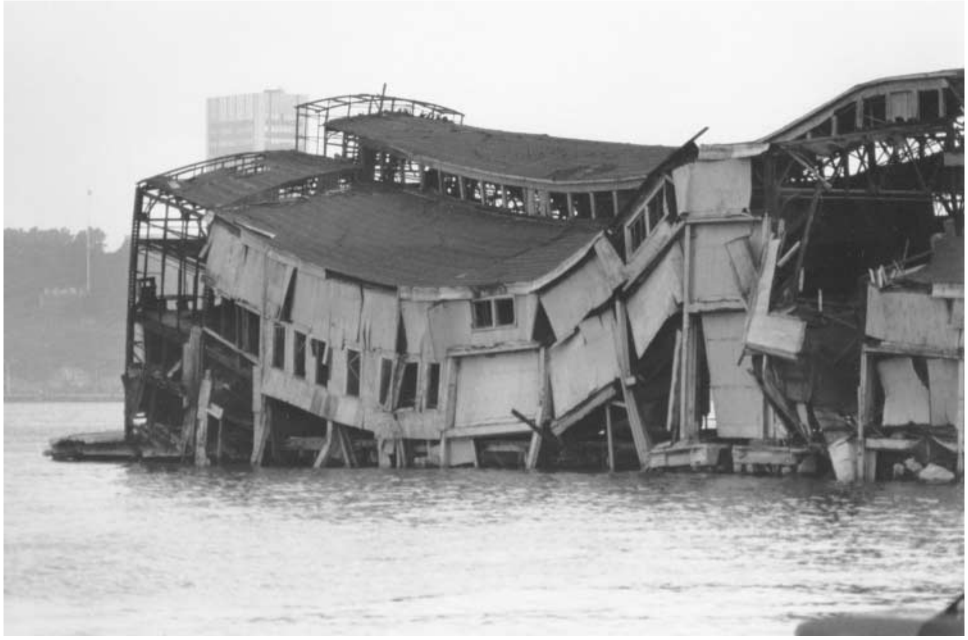

Leonard Fink: Pier 45 from the foot of 10th Street on the West Side of Manhattan (Courtesy: National Archive of Lesbian and Gay History, Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center, New York)

In the Shadow of the Object

Sexual Memory in the AIDS Epidemic

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Much of the work of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender past has involved finding or creating spaces in which to know ourselves and become known to others. Given the role such spaces play in supporting the formation of identities and communities, "queer geographies" may be said to reflect discontinuities and sympathies between psychic and social spaces, complicating the distinction between public and private. Histories of queer psychic and social forms may be read, therefore, from the geographies in which they were constructed. One of these histories is explored through a close reading of Manhattan's West Side piers, for many years a well-known gay public sex site that has now been demolished and replaced with a public park. The history of the site surfaced particularly clearly during the first years of the AIDS epidemic, when the disappearance of the site mirrored the devastation experienced by the community.

Keywords: *queer; gay; public sex; HIV/AIDS; history; psychoanalysis*

> Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, so that the latter could henceforth be criticized by a special mental faculty like an object, like a forsaken object.
>
> —Sigmund Freud (1917/1959)

Author's Note: A companion piece to this essay is "Re-Surfacing: Race, AIDS, Sexuality and the Politics of Mourning" (Sember, 1999). Peggy Phelan, Mick Taussig, Allen Feldman, and Lynda Hart provided important guidance on previous drafts of this article. I would also like to thank M. B. for getting this started. In doing this work, I carry with me memories of Jay. He remains, even in death, an intellectual and emotional intimate.

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Sexual Space: Writing, Reading, and Cruising

Histories of queer sexuality almost always include elaborate reference to place, for much of the work of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender past has involved finding and creating spaces where we can come to know ourselves and be known. Because these projects concern identity and community, our efforts are at once psychic and social and cut across some of the basic organizing principles of space, such as the distinction between public and private. Therefore, "queer geographies" may be said to reflect discontinuities and sympathies between psychic and physical spaces. For example, through our repeated acts of "coming out," we put in place personal and community maps that trace where and how we are "out" and when and where we are not. These uneven geographies of identity follow historical patterns (frequently indicating where it is safe to express queer desires and where such longing is dangerous) and physical forms to construct environments with a quality that the poet John Ashbery (1987) figured as being "like the transparent bricks in a particular dream, they cannot always be seen" (p. 18). Indeed, they are largely imagined and inspire careful reading and considered interpretations.[1]

In his account of the construction of queer space, Jean-Ulrick Désert (1997) also pointed to an invisible dimension in place when he suggested that "the possibility of any space is latent until the moment it doubles and is devoured by the contradictions of its program and the actual events of its construction, use, and eventual destruction" (p. 21). In other words, spaces consist of more than the objective geography they inhabit. Instead, they are located within time and are the unsettled product of particular performative configurations of history, form, and function. For Michel de Certeau (1984), this excavation of latent possibilities implies an interpretative exposition effected by "trajectories [that] trace out…interests and desires" and bring into relief a location's "prescribed syntactical forms" (p. xviii). This is more than filling form with content—it is the composition of space through performances of contradictory interests and desires (the transparent bricks in Ashbery's [1987] image) that are always interpreting spatial forms into new elaborations of place.[2] As both Désert and de Certeau's observations intimate, this process has a certain violence to it, for the contradiction of convention is a form of destruction, the destruction of form. To consider the "debris" of this process is to access histories built from what I would term the dialectic of space and desire. To explore this dialectic, I wish to move through spaces and practices that have long been and remain among the most destructive and constructive in their relation to sexual identity: the geographies and practices of public sex.

Although the trajectories of cruising have inscribed some well-established sexual geographies, they have not translated into stable or shared definitions of queer sexual culture. The wrestling over public sex and sexual sites conducted both within queer communities and in the larger public sphere continues to pose fundamental questions about the terms under which sexual identity and sex are transacted.[3] For example, Eric Rofes (1997) has queried whether "our sex cultures [are] evidence of our stigmatization, abuse, and reprobation" (p. 3). Or, to borrow James Baldwin's language about a parallel matter, can they be understood as "cultural patterns coming into existence by means of brutal necessity," and should they, therefore, be seen as strategies for survival?" (p. 3). In themselves these questions imply that sex, sexual identity, and the cultures that reflect them involve a history of violence enacted within the community as well as experienced from without. We are compelled to evaluate the kinds of identities or sex we perform in terms of their relationship to the histories of this violence, what Rofes termed a history of survival.

In light of the AIDS crisis, the stakes when answering these questions are extremely high. Survival, which has always qualified the work of sexuality in the face of violence, now also conforms to the patterns and practices of an epidemic that in many instances actually reflects the very contours of our sexual cultures. One of the paradoxes established by AIDS lies in the value placed on sex and sexuality by our various attempts to articulate the meaning of the epidemic—for example, to some, sex is what must be survived, whereas to others sex is the means by which we are to survive.[4]

The paradox is equally apparent in the geographies inscribed by the epidemic. Commenting on recent queer mappings, Aaron Betsky (1997) observed that it is

> as if a double trace has suddenly come to light in many American cities: the shadow city of queerness that exploited places of business, empty lots, and roads for sexual acts, and the network of disease that laid itself over these acts. (p. 168)

Ironically, by "coming to light," these cities of sex and illness have also disappeared. Almost a generation has died, and sites have altered substantially because of public health regulations, policing, demolition, historic preservation, and gentrification. Ashbery's (1987) figure of "transparent bricks," initially read as the form of desire, now also describes what is only a trace of that desire, places of loss. The loss does, however, define a temporality that may offer new constructions for spaces of queerness and revise the performances of our sex. When moving through the shadows of these spaces, however, we may enter into relationships with the past that proffer, among other things, possibilities for survival.

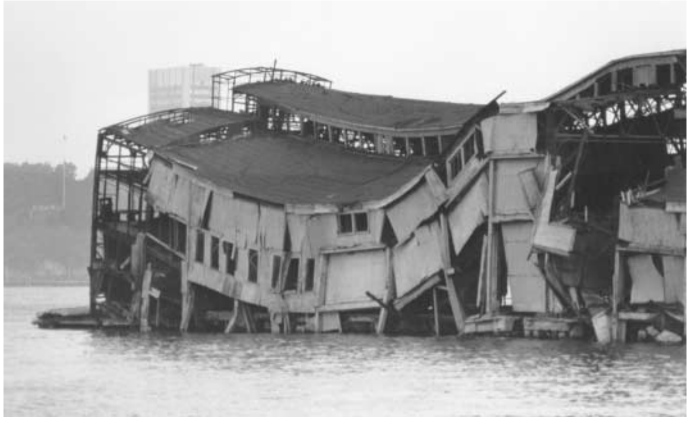

Figure 1. Pier 45 at the Foot of West 10th Street on the West Side of Manhattan (1978)

Source: Photograph by Leonard Fink. Courtesy of the National Archive of Lesbian and Gay History, Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center, New York City.

Transparent Structures: The Shadow and the Light

On the West Side of Manhattan, where the Hudson flows past Greenwich Village's newly created public park, once stood four long piers extending out over the river. Known to many in the gay community as a site for public sex, the piers were once the place where ocean liners berthed, cargo was loaded and unloaded, and passengers in transit gathered in gloomy, cavernous terminals. In the years following the end of the golden age of passenger liners, these terminals stood empty and without regular maintenance fell into disrepair and decay; beams, rotted by the salt air, weakened and collapsed; roofs caved in, exposing the buildings' interiors to fierce storms that caused irreparable damage;

and eventually, the piers themselves began to weaken, buckle, and sink closer to the surface of the river.

Gay men visited the site throughout these years of abandonment.[5] Shared fragments were etched into the interiors of the decaying buildings, and stories of sex on the piers, or between and in the backs of the trucks that stopped there overnight, circulated through the city and beyond, creating, in time, one of the most legendary sites for public sex. The writer Samuel Delaney (1988), describing his experiences on the piers in the 1960s, called them a place of "libidinal saturation," where one could find

> thirty-five, fifty, a hundred all-but-strangers hugely ordered, highly social, attentive, silent, and grounded in a certain care, if not community. At those times, within those van-walled alleys, now between the trucks, now in the back of open loaders, cock passed from mouth to mouth to hand to ass to mouth without ever breaking contact with other flesh for more than seconds.…It was engrossing; it was exhausting; it was reassuring; and it was very human. (pp. 129-130)

So it was. In file behind the beginning of the AIDS crisis, however, and after the closing of the bathhouses and the stringent enforcement of regulations controlling gay cinemas, bars, and bookstores, the buildings on the piers were razed. Until just a few years ago, the piers were little more than open platforms, exposed to the wind and rain and without shadows. Wire fencing and aggressive policing made them increasingly inaccessible, and they languished as the city and state governments debated their future.[6]

Although the sheds had disappeared, the piers that stood through the first decade and half of the AIDS epidemic were not empty. Traces of their complex role in the evolving gay geography and history of New York circulated about the place, and the surfaces of the structures held an accumulation of graffiti that referenced many of the events that happened there. These texts brought to the site news of significant events in the gay community, constituting an informal archive of the times through which we lived. These inscriptions were almost always about violence, love, danger, and loss:[7]

> fokin faget

accused one, while another warned,

> two of our brothers were gay bashed here last week WATCH YOURSELF

Other texts aggressively claimed the site as queer and issued retaliatory threats:

> don't tread on us [painted between two lavender triangles]
> we are fags we've got the power
> FUCK QUEER BASHERS

Besides the cautions concerning violence were those that warned of infection:

> FUCK ME SAFE

and

> Live to be Legend

A little further along, there were remembrances of those who have died:

Mark Roger Todd Larry James Brian

and a painted collage of pink triangles, flowers, and cocks that cum as though they are weeping.

And on the corner of a concrete slab, a fading stencil reminds us that

SILENCE=DEATH

and a promise

johnny
&
nick
4 ever in love
4/89

While transforming the piers into a memorial site, these inscriptions measured the fading of the space itself. Long a place for negotiating boundaries—as departure and entry points during the age of sea travel, the border between land and water—the piers now stood as a portal between past and present, loss and love, violence and death. Like a storyteller, they had the narrative authority accorded by death to tell a "whole lifetime" composed "not only [of their] own experience but no little of the experience of others" (Benjamin, 1968, p. 108). Through these recollections, the piers documented the history and definition of sexual cultures that have reflected and directed the emergence of our contemporary understandings of gay identity and community.

Gay men continued to gather and have sex on the piers. Indeed, in the years since their demolition and the beginning of the AIDS crisis, revised patterns of seduction settled into the ruins, and they remained a site for the elaboration of sexual cultures. In his poem "Forgotten Sex," Ashbery (1987) described such spaces as the "surface and the theater for all that is to come" (p. 18), and indeed, the performances of the piers, whether in their destruction, decay, or complete demolition, to the extent that they offer interpretations of past formations, articulate the question, What will become of us?

These are the piers I was introduced to late one October night shortly after moving to New York City in 1988. Lying on the concrete surface toward the end of one of the piers, a few feet above the slate black surface of the river, wrapped against the autumn cold in a lover's arms, I began to hear, through his history, the stories of the space.[8]

He was 14 when he first came down to the river and watched men jerking off together; an image of possibility silently and attentively held with him back home in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn until 4 years later when he returned to the piers and had sex with a man for the first time. The piers were his "coming out." As we spoke, the lights from cars traveling down West Street flashed off the river's surface, momentarily snapping into focus the silhouettes of men on the other piers. Some leaned against the wire fences and concrete barricades staring out across the water, while others sat together talking or slowly cruised back and forth along the length of the piers.

In the months that passed, he told of other visits to the piers: Kevin, with the southern accent, whom he saw more than once; the uncut Puerto Rican who said "I love you"; and the older man he had gone home with and had allowed to fuck him without a condom, initiating a panic that kept him away from the piers for close to a year. With this panic, we crossed into the time of AIDS, fit in my first night on the piers, and continued on. Our memories knotted together for a time, and then we parted and there was silence. The piers I knew were built from these stories and their silences.

The Doubling of Space: Telling and Repeating

The recollections I have heard on the piers do not constitute an official history of the site. They offer glimpses, like those grabbed in the flash of light across water, of presences that ghost through our current intimacies. In much the same way, I came to sense the invisible presence of the demolished sheds that once stood on the piers. Older men, particularly, helped reconstruct this architecture through the memories and photographs they have shared.[9]

One collection of photographs contains images of rows of trucks parked in the shadows of the elevated highway that once ran the length of the West Side of Manhattan. In one of the images, a transvestite emerges from the back of a truck into the glare of police lights and throws a starlet kiss to the camera, recalling an earlier photograph in which another drag queen, following that famous night at the Stonewall Bar, steps from the back of a police van smiling radiantly as though she knew the city had changed fundamentally that night. In another image, a man without trousers walks through a beam of sunlight—it cuts a broad stripe across his bare ass, and his skin is radiant against the black leather of his vest. Couples are framed by cross-beams supporting the warehouse roofs, and paintings of mythical sexual figures—devils in sunshades fucking tattooed, muscular satyrs—adorn the walls.

While sharing their images, the photographers told of the men they had met on the piers and had sex with. “The place was better than any bathhouse, back room, or Fire Island beach,” one of the men insisted as he carefully tutored me in his history of how things have come to be as they are.

These catalogs of first visits, of extraordinary bodies and extraordinary sex, the tales of hundreds and hundreds of partners, told and retold, repeated by one man after another, defined the syntax of the place. The tense is timeless, even mythic, but for the abrupt and brutal rupture of the epidemic.[10] These tales inevitably foreclose any possibility of recovery. The irredeemable loss is what I heard when, in the midafternoon lull at the restaurant where I worked, a fellow waiter, ill with AIDS, told me his story. Speaking of himself in the 1970s, newly arrived from Amsterdam, he conjured images that echoed Delaney’s (1988) sense of saturation:

> There were so many people packed into the truck. You couldn’t tell who or what you were touching. With the door closed it was completely dark and very hot. Leather felt like skin and skin like leather. It was fantastic. You children who did not know that time know nothing. My boyfriend and I walked down the street chained together and no one turned a head. You can’t do that now. We were into everything then. Many times in the trucks, I was so drugged I didn’t know if I was fucking a man or a dog. Down there, now, it is so sad. I can’t go down there anymore. Everything has gone.

He went on to qualify these images of saturation with tales of police raids that add weight to our present fears of silence and closeted spaces and that explain in part the still unsettled relationship some in the community have to our cultures of public sex.

After setting up large floodlights, the police threw open the doors and transferred the occupants into police vehicles. They drove miles out of the city and dropped everyone off on the side of the road. "I walked back to New York many time from far out in New Jersey . . . . It was worth it."

Although "everything has gone," the sharing of such memories contributed to the work of seduction, marking the sexual exchanges that occurred on the piers with an aura of recollection. The repetitive form of these tales is mirrored in the repetitions of sex itself and in the way past gestures shadow the caresses given and received in a place of so much loss. Perhaps we "children" may know something of that time. Indeed, sex itself has the potential for recollection and may be a form of telling. Performed and retold in the shadow of AIDS, sex inherits, through loss, an authority for recollection.

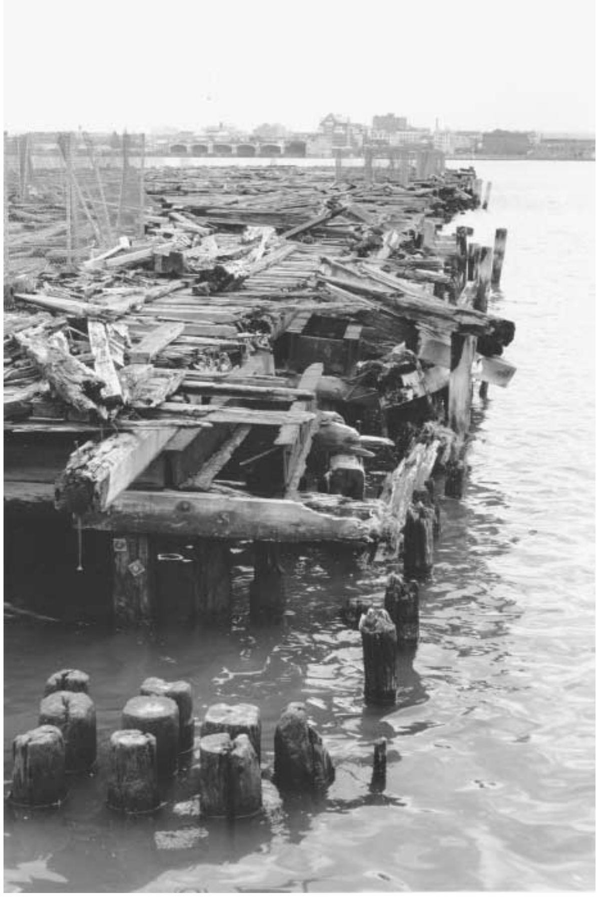

Figure 2. Pier 49 at the Foot of Bank Street on the West Side of Manhattan (1991)

Source: Photograph by Robert Sember.

The Value of Recollection: Metaphor and Mourning

To some, recollection is the defining reaction to the AIDS crisis. AIDS "speeds up remembrance," concluded the historian Robert Dawidoff (1989), and makes "specific truths about our lives and deaths the basic stake of writing." The intention is, "to keep the community going through hell on earth" (p. 175). The "specific truths" to which he referred are not only those of the doctors and scientist but also the truths of "who we are" (p. 175), pointing to the fact that at stake in the AIDS crisis are issues that go beyond the matter of illness and concern our very sense of self and community. Clearly, much of this struggle, in keeping with disputes long central to our gay identity, is focused on questions of sex.

It makes sense, then, that the impact of the AIDS crisis has been most intensely felt in relation to the collective function of places such as the piers. Robert Glück (1989) gave an impression of this function when he wrote of "coming out" in the 1960s:

> For me, a budding gay man, the new identity meant sexuality . . . . We created a mental and geographic terrain in which we could know each other and be known . . . the invita-

> tion to the sexual act unified a community and was its main source of communication, validating other forms of discourse. (pp. 84-85)

Within the AIDS crisis, however, many of these sites appear to lie in ruins, and we comb through the debris of sex for clues to who "we" are now. Dawidoff's (1989) urging "to keep the community going" is a complicated proposition in this geographic and psychic terrain. "To keep going" implies both the continuity of tradition and the simple goal of staying alive, which are not necessarily compatible. Nor is it clear that what we uncover in our search, what we work to sustain, can or should be said to reflect who *we* were.

The recollections of sex on the piers referenced above illustrate that they have not gone unmarked by the loss occasioned by AIDS. Straddling the line that appears to have severed gay history into a time before and a time after the AIDS crisis, the ruins of the piers stood as an elaborate architecture of such repetition and remain available as a geographic and imaginary site for an elaboration of the psychopolitics of gay sexuality in the time of AIDS. This is a time when death beckons us to an interpretation of the different memories and experiences that characterize our history.

Douglas Crimp has long concerned himself with how AIDS redefines the relationship between the individual and the community. Initially, this is expressed as an interest in the power we may find in what we choose to repeat. Crimp (1987) pursued this concern in his essay "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," in which, anticipating Glück (1989), he emphasizes the centrality of sex to the subjectivities, communities, and cultures of gay men. According to Crimp, these derive from "the great multiplicity" of pleasures we have shared. It was "that psychic preparation, that experimentation, that conscious work on our own sexualities…[that] allowed many of us to change our sexual behaviors" (p. 253) in the face of AIDS. Thus, it has been from the repetitions occasioned by loss that new possibilities have emerged. "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic" is a fierce manifesto giving voice and strategy to the AIDS activism that became the most visible image of the queer movement in the late 1980s.

Two years later, however, in a piece written toward the end of the first decade of the AIDS crisis, "Mourning and Militancy," Crimp's (1989) tone was subdued as he investigated the relationship between strategies of militancy and the emotions of mourning. Prompted by the observation that gay men are troubled and separated by grief, for we find ourselves caught in an opposition between the internal dynamics of mourning and the anger of activism, Crimp's concern shifted to understanding how, when faced with death, gay men may use sex to broker their relationship to the community. By analyzing this opposition, Crimp threw light on the psychic-social structures defining the ambivalent position of gay men in the crisis.

Freud's (1917/1959, p. 153) observation that "the loss of some abstraction. . . such as fatherland, liberty, an ideal" may be felt as deeply as the death of a beloved prompted Crimp (1989) to offer the following inventory of loss:

> Sex was everywhere for us, and everything we wanted to venture: golden showers and water sports, cocksucking and rimming, fucking and fist fucking. Now . . . alongside the dismal toll of death, what many of us have lost is a culture of sexual possibility: back rooms, tea rooms, bookstores, movie houses, and baths; the trucks, the pier, the ramble, the dunes. (pp. 11-12)

These object-sites and mourning rites no longer represent a "culture of sexual possibility" but a collectivity of loss and a culture of impossibility.

According to this reading, in the AIDS crisis, we encounter a fragmenting collectivity, a collectivity in loss. AIDS splits us according to our infection status and stage of illness. We discover different pasts, face divergent futures, and hold conflicting memories. It is inevitable, for example, that a dividing line must be drawn between those who have "known" the pre-AIDS sexual meanings and those who came after. The divide manifests in differing responses to safer sex, which, Crimp (1989) suggested, define a generational difference: for men in their 20s and early 30s, pre-AIDS sex is an ideal, and safer sex is "an act of defiance"; whereas for older men, safe sex is indicative of "resignation."

That we communicate across these boundaries, as is the case in places such as the piers, is an important characteristic of sexual projects within the AIDS crisis—idealism, defiance, and resignation do not stay bound to their generational constituencies. Among the forms this communication takes are recollections that may not even reflect "who we are"—AIDS has produced a significant literature of nostalgia.

Writing in 1989, Robert Glück recalled the gay male sexual revolution in the 1960s: "I, and others glimpsed Utopia for a moment. We saw that the world was the world, not someone's interpretation of it; that life was the fulfillment of itself; that our destinies—we ourselves—were our own" (p. 84).

Perhaps, at best, we can reconstruct such images that, appearing to hold a truth free of interpretation, glide across the jagged lines of memory and soften the present harshness for a time by rerunning what Edmund White (1989), clearly doubting the veracity of such accounts, referred to as "idealized movies of past realities" (p. 146).

When the piers were first being discovered by gay men, they were an "escape" from the proscriptions against homosexuality. Many reminiscences about the pre-AIDS sexual climate evidence a renewed hankering after such an escape. That was a time when "a new principle of adhesiveness" came into being, of sex that provided "a daily brush with the ecstatic . . . a force binding familiar atoms into new polymers of affinity" (White, 1989, p. 147) and a "sexual communalism" (Tucker, 1989, p. 124) or Whitmanesque democracy in which the needs of all were taken care of without the tyranny of leaders (Troxler, 1989).[11]

In his provocatively entitled essay "Death and the Erotic Imagination," Michael Bronski (1989) suggested that this liberation is not at an end and should be the strategy used to respond to the AIDS crisis. After noting that gay men have "liberated sex from the confines of state and religion, from the proscriptions of gender, and have legitimized unadulterated sexual pleasure . . . as an end unto itself," Bronski suggested that "the gay movement can learn to deal with death in the same way it has learned to deal with sex," to see it for what it is and to deal with it realistically, not "as a metaphor, but as a physical experience, a material, not a moral reality" (pp. 226-227).

Bronski (1989) implied that the past is recoupable, that we must deal with loss by undoing the meanings that cloud the essentially unchangeable facts of pleasure. The logic of this reality in the case of the piers is illustrated in Andrew Holleran's (1983) prescient short story "Nostalgia for the Mud":

> "If Westway[12] is ever built," continued my friend, "and the shoreline made pretty by city planners—when the city is totally renovated, when gays have restored all the tenements, garden restaurants have sprouted on the Lower East Side, and the meatpacking district is given over entirely to boutiques and cardshops—then we'll build an island in New York Harbor composed entirely of rotting piers, blocks of collapsed walls, and litter strewn lots. Ruins become decor, nostalgia for the mud. We all want to escape; you escaped to the city. Would you have ended up in ruins had you not been gay?" (p. 69)

And what is a surer image of an obedient reality than this pristine repetition, doubling, infinitely unchanging in an ecstatic snipe against history or, as in Glück's (1989) origin myth for the gay community, the dissolving of the rules, "an invisible world made for me . . . invented for someone else's benefit . . . in a burst of laughter" (p. 84)? Perhaps we could invest in this playground, a gay Disneyworld free of the disturbing details of what the piers were, such as the rune-marked shroud in which they were draped and where our sexual encounters are not haunted by the losses we have had to endure. This truly would, as others advise us to do when nursing the wounds of love, "put things to rest and let the past be the past."

Bronski's (1989) vision of a gay community free of gender rules and metaphor, a timeless and institutionless collectivity, allows little room for the observations Crimp (1989) made. The range of meanings Crimp articulated for safer sex (resignation and defiance) have no place in this contrivance. Bronski claimed not to propose a fantasy, however. He recalled this way of being in the world as, in his words, a material reality.

Crimp (1989) too talked of reality in his discussion of sex within AIDS and, like Bronski (1989), he suggested that there is something about our current condition that is not entirely "real." This ambivalence is one he took from Freud's (1917/1959) description of mourning work, which entails, initially, a peculiar tolerance for fantasy's dominance of reality. For a time, the mourner "turns away from reality" and lives in the shadow of the object that, Freud tells us, falls across the ego so that it too may be treated like a lost object. In this shadow the mourner is ambivalent in the face of the choice presented between a separation from the beloved and a move toward life, or identification with him and a move toward death, sustained by hallucination that the beloved still lives.[13] The work of mourning is complete when this belief or "hallucination" is forsaken, and a "deference for reality gains the day." At this point, "the ego becomes free and uninhibited again" (Freud, 1917/1959, p. 166), achieving a return to normalcy.

But what, asked Crimp (1989), is the process by which gay men defer to reality in the AIDS crisis? What would it mean for gay men to return to a position of normalcy? In response to these questions, he pointed to two barriers that interrupt the continuity between the psychic and the social and thus prevent the accomplishment of mourning for gay men in the AIDS crisis.

First, AIDS is not merely about loss; it is an arena for competing interpretations of gay sexuality, with the result that larger social conflicts interfere and compete with psychic processes. Therefore, even though mourning was a private matter for Freud (1917/1959), it has profound social inflections in the AIDS crisis, for, as Crimp (1989) pointed out, "from the outset, there is already a social interdiction of our private efforts" (p. 7). When gay men defer to "reality," it does not enable them to be "free and uninhibited." Rather, to return to "reality" is to enter into the violent conflict of sexuality.

Second, AIDS deaths occur within a larger cycle of mortality, an epidemic, establishing a metonymic relationship between the death of the individual and the threat faced by the community as a whole. Identification with the loved object, a common enough experience for anyone who has lived and lost, is, as Crimp (1989) pointed out, exacerbated for gay men "to the extent that we are directly and immediately implicated in the particular cause of these deaths, and implicated, as well, through the specific nature of our deepest pleasures in life—our gay sexuality" (p. 10).

In response to Bronski's (1989) proposal, I would suggest that although at some point entering the dream world of the piers was designed to bring sex to bear on the reality of the city beyond its walls, today, in our practices of survival, we bring reality to bear on sex. This is a proverb derived from the historical imaginary of sites such as the piers, where despite the numerous protestations to the contrary, death plays a part in the meanings we make of sex—resignation and defiance being but two of them.

A second concern with nostalgic longings for the pre-AIDS sexual past is that they frequently ignore the marginal position that sites such the piers hold within a community sensitive to the price of silence and secrecy, no matter how attentive, ordered, or social. Thus, although definitive of the character of the intimacy of the space (a collectivity forming in large part in response to an injunction), the public sex on the piers also transgresses certain definitions gay men wish to apply to the community. "It's a fringe psychology," a community leader told me when we discussed public sex. "It exists completely separately from other parts of their lives. It is a secret. It can't enter into the main roads of their lives."

Traveling by the back roads of the piers as they return within the AIDS crisis has renewed discussions of the boundaries of our gay identity, both individual and social. This makes a sensitivity to the structural similarities between memory, sex, and the details of space of crucial concern, for what I am positing is that the AIDS crisis is a heightened disturbance of the ways in which we order our relations and thoughts such that (sexual) recollection exists not simply as a trope through which we articulate our experiences but is the very unsettled position that we attempt (and inevitable fail) to transform into a secure sense of identity.

I understood the mournful ambivalence generated by the coupling of sex with loss when I first saw a figure, 10 feet high, outlined in white paint on the surface of one of the structures. Above its head were painted the slogans "Gay Power" and "ACT UP." Seeing the image for the first time, I, like many others, assumed that it marked the place where someone had been killed. Then I noticed its sizable erection and the head bursting into a large flower. The conjunction of the sexual and the mourned, the violent and the loved, the desired and the feared flashed up in that moment in an intolerable, even embarrassing ambivalence. What, given this ambivalence, does it mean to return to the sexual history of the piers, and what paths do we trace through these inscriptions of anger, recollection, and delight? Or, more appropriately, what path do they trace across us?

The work of reasoning in the AIDS crisis is miserable, in the sense that it is frequently ambiguous, dividing into dichotomies—psychic-social, memory-history—that are not easily reconciled. This raises some difficult issues for a community that is attempting to respond to—more than that, to survive—the epidemic. It seems unavoidable that a certain ambiguity must characterize the renewed political consciousness within the gay community as well as numerous other projects (such as the critical and historical investigations concerned with sexuality that have formed into the discipline of queer studies) developed in the first decades of AIDS. The eroticism of the piers weaves a complex psychopolitics of memory, loss, repetition, and pleasure, such as we see patterned in the emblematic figure outlined above.

End up in Ruins: Sex and Survival

I wish to return to the piers and the relationship between sexual telling and sexual repetition to make some preliminary suggestions about how these structures of loss may also mark temporal difference and therefore offer new possibilities for survival.

In his recollection of the piers, *The Motion of Light in Water*, the African American writer Samuel Delaney (1988) provided a glimpse of the unsettling potential in pleasures inflected through recollection. At one point in the work, he described an episode on the piers when he found himself, in the dawn's early light, looking out over the waters of the Hudson while being sucked off by a White trucker. Transfixed by the patterning of the river's surface, he attended to

> two nets, one of shadow, one of light, on the wrinkling and raveling blue interlaced, interpenetrated, pulled endlessly one out of the other. It seemed for a moment that both would become one, or would reveal themselves to be two aspects, differently lighted, of a complex singularity . . . (p. 130)

The incoherent reflection of the two men on the river's surface provided Delaney with a sublime image of this interpenetration. He almost felt himself given over to the perceptual dissolution of singularity in the orgasmic pleasure promised as "the wet heat of his mouth on my engorged penis retreated, came forward, retreated, came forward again . . . I felt very good and very tired." The reverie was broken off before he could be fully "swallowed," however: "He let me go from his mouth to lean his head upon my lap. Then he laughed and looked up. 'I'm tired,' he said, with a kind of embarrassment." Delaney then went down on him, only to be gently pushed aside: "'I'm too tired,' he repeated and patted my shoulder. 'I can't make it'?" (pp. 130-131).

This choreography of substitutions, attention passing from one man to the other with the quiet, gentle fluidity of fatigue, and spoken in tones as hushed and as weighty as the river over which it is transacted, provides an image of what Delaney (1988) described as "care, if not community." It is a loving recollection lovingly described and resigned to its disappointment. Like the trucker, it too does not make it; prematurely withdrawing, it trails off into " . . . "; a fragile, inexpressible point.

More than 20 years later, however, when writing of this event, Delaney's (1988) recollection prompted an additional shift—illustrating an important although usually silent dynamic in our work in queer studies—from memory to theory. Acknowledging that what he encountered that morning reflects a larger struggle conducted way beyond the bounds of the piers, Delaney suggested that

> the parallel column containing the discourse of desire, whether satisfied or unrequited (but always purveying its trope of truth), forever runs beside one of positive, commercial, material analysis. Many of us raised on literature, have learned to supply the absent column when the material is presented alone. And a few of us have begun to ask, at least, for the column of objects, actions, economics, and material forces when presented only with, in whatever figurative form, desire. (p. 131)

And so we cruise across the divide between matter and memory, reality and image. We read and write into space the interests and desires that describe where we have come from and prepare us for where we might end up. In the doubled images of himself with a cock in his mouth, recollected and reflected on the fragmenting surfaces of the river and text, Delaney (1988) captured across a span of 20 years the process whereby both geographic and psychic space repeatedly "double, devour and destroy" each other (Désert, 1997).

I would argue that AIDS accelerates and intensifies the figurative rhythm of desire that Delaney (1988) conveyed. These are smaller projects, which, as they trip up on the margins or succumb to fatigue, unfold, as does writing, the surfaces of place and memory. The work of desire, searching for objects to match the fictions, fictions to match the desire, is also frightening at times. Returning to the reflection of that morning from within this time of AIDS gives a deadly shade to the interpenetrating, interlacing move to singularity men's bodies may perform. Care must be taken when crossing the boundaries that separate the parallel columns that Delaney defined.

Negotiating that boundary may bring us together. Yet as Delaney's (1988) figure implies, it must also keep us apart. It is in this sense that I have become accustomed to the motion of light on water. In the flashes of light across the dark river that October night in 1988 when I first visited the piers, I began developing memories that move to the rhythm of that surface whereby affiliations form and fall away.

This, I learned, is the seduction of the place. My instruction in this rhythm came during a long conversation held on a hot August afternoon with a man I met on the piers. In his account, reminiscent of Delaney's (1988), he knitted an ambivalent weave of fantasy and reality, beginnings and endings, with a sadness and warmth that he identified as specific to the site. In one column, the compelling pleasure of being close with someone else:

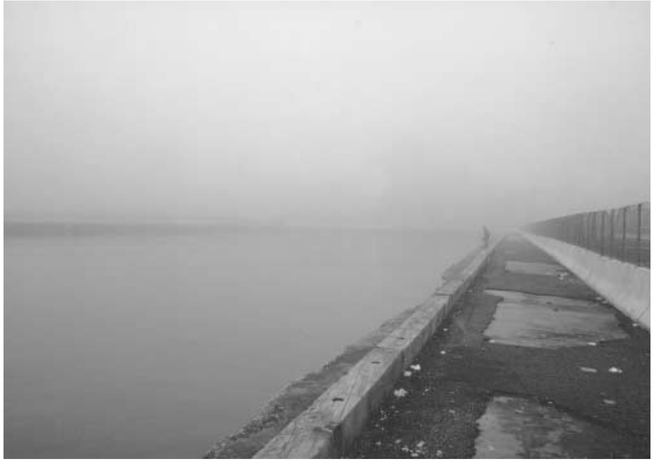

Figure 3. "Foggy Morning," From the Pier 45 Series (1995) Photograph courtesy of Richard Renaldi.

> You are offering pleasure, sharing pleasure. Fantasy is a profound way of communicating. You take pleasure. Somebody who is a stranger and you are able to share this very great thing. I think it has to do with having these fantasies in other people that you can't in fact share outside of the place. It's kind of idyllic.

And in the other column, the definitive "failure" of sex on the piers that drives repetition:

> Cruising time is sustained time. Nobody cruises rapidly. Hope and desire enable you to put up with the extended time. Cruising is gauging each other's fantasies, building up hopes, crushing hopes and trying not to seem crushed. Sometimes I think the drive to go back is because one is never satisfied. I don't think it's just a matter of having fun. I feel there is a real seeking. Maybe it's a desire for the people, the place, the sequence to be permanent. Maybe it's a desire to transcend a need for the place at all, a desire to be a part of the place and not just transient.

This is a lesson in the exploitation of temporal boundaries forced to a point at which they enact their rules, and real time takes over from desire. The point is to build hopes, crush hopes. The touch on the piers ripples the enchanting reflection on the surface of the river and troubles the illusion that the intimacy may hold us close forever. The conversation continued:

> The orgasm becomes increasingly unimportant. It becomes more about acceptance and fantasy. Somehow the orgasm makes it real, its messy, its evidence that something happened. Often having an orgasm is ultimately disappointing. I felt as though it was my objective to make someone have an orgasm. But I think the larger objective was to make someone desire you. And it was almost like the orgasm signified that the transaction was complete and it meant, “Okay, we’re done with our game. It’s over.”

More than crushing the hope of the other, though, is the reflective interplay between self and other. In the process, one alternately promotes and disappoints one’s own desires. For this man the transactions of the piers are experiences in which the shadow of loss not only plays in the social sphere but falls psychically as well:

> When I first see the other person’s penis, I black out, my senses become dulled. It strikes me as being like grief, because the end is so much more in sight. I become aware that it’s a fantasy when the finishing line is in sight. Then it just becomes work.

I offer this here as a model of sex as grief, where, on a smaller scale, the give and take of the libido and its de/attachment to an object is rehearsed. This form is sustained by and in turn sustains the repetitious cycle between desire and its exhaustion. The figure of death, prominently displayed within the meaning of sex in the AIDS epidemic, is harnessed to an erotic end, while sex facilitates the work required for mourning. The consequence of these erotics may be a rethinking of the value and structure of “community,” for rather than seeing a common singularity in the shared sexual desire for the body of another man, we encounter an unraveling, a point at which the work of memory, desire, and grief cause a “blackout.” In this system, the hypnotic network of light and shade Delaney (1988) described mirrors the disturbance of the self, which, silhouetted against a temporal surface, is brokered by the repetitive longings of desire and grief.

I Can’t Make It: Sex as Grief

> The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in that sensation which that material object will give us) of which we have no inkling. And it depends on chance whether or not we come upon this object before we ourselves must die.
>
> —Marcel Proust (quoted in Roth, 1987, p. 1)

In applying Freud’s theory of mourning to the gay community’s response to AIDS, Crimp (1989) emphasized the repetitive presence of history and memory. He reminded us that loss is attended to by a return, reminding us that our current trauma is perhaps a repetition of an earlier one. If we take Crimp’s project of a psychoanalytic reading of these issues further, we may get a clearer sense of the history of the sexual structure I have just defined: sex as grief.

I learned in the back and forth of that summer conversation (an instruction in an ethics of care true to the repetitions of public sex) that underlying certain gaps that AIDS may appear to have inscribed on the social surface of sexuality is the psychic drama of sexual desire. The mournful work arising from the conflict the ego manages between illusion and reality has been previously rehearsed and is part of the history of psychic structures themselves, particularly narcissistic structures.

In mourning, a hallucinatory wish-psychosis sustains, temporarily, the libido attachment to the dead object. In melancholia, interest in the world is withdrawn and a critical eye turned inward upon the ego, effectively killing the external object a second time and threatening such a fate for the ego. Both repeat an ancient grief resulting from an early shattering of the ego ideal.[14]

There is a mournful countenance to this psyche, constantly craving for a recuperation of a lost relation and seeking it through the love relations it establishes with others. Indeed, in all our relations we repeat, to some extent, this loss as we strive to heal its effects. Narcissism names the recognition of this state and a seeking to, "re-find an object [in a set of ideal identifications] that was in fact never possessed, an object that existed only as a mirage, indeed, that may have existed only as the shadow of a mirage" (Boothby, 1991, p. 31).

The illusion of the ego caught in the shadow of the object is the belief that boundaries can be transformed and the object refound. Specific truths about sex and death, beyond metaphor, are the objects of such thought. This is the cornerstone of Bronski's (1989) call for a community that will sustain its identity across the fissures of morality through pleasure as "an end unto itself." This is a narcissistic identification, one that dissolves time. The work of mourning, however, transcribes a "reality" that is the refusal of the truths of such a distinction. In such a reality, facts and truths do not hold up, requiring that we search for a different sort of resolution—a solution in repetitions that are fracturing rather than identical. It is from repetition and into difference that desire, as experienced by some on the piers, displaces us. "Displacement is endemic to sexuality," wrote Bersani, arguing that "sexual desire initiates . . . an agitated fantasmatic activity in which original (but, from the start, unlocatable) objects of desire get lost in the images they generate. Desire, by its very nature, turns us away from its objects" (p. 221).

Returning to the piers, walking in the shadow of their dreamscape ruins, reading the emblematic figures, in what is now no more that the transparent bricks, the memories of what once was there, is to tell, like Benjamin's (1968) storyteller, a tale, an ethics of care, valuable precisely because sexuality cannot escape its moral force.

This is a precarious position. What threatens to be read from the piers as architecture of recollection is a particular, a final tale. For in revealing what has passed, the piers also prophesy the day when they will, finally, completely disappear. Aware of this, Benjamin (1968) observed that the storyteller, "could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story" (pp. 108-109). For sex as an act of mourning, extinguishing the tale, in one sense, mirrors too closely the wages of certain kinds of pleasure to be accepted lightly. Benjamin would call this a proverb, "a ruin which stands on the site of an old story and in which a moral twines about a happening like ivy around a wall" (p. 108). It is impossible not to see in the emblematic forms on the piers the entwined history of our sex and to therefore search out lessons to be learned from the AIDS crisis. It is this unending work that mourning performs, leading us into repetitions that have the potential to transform loss into survival.

Notes

1. The exemplary performative space, as Eve Sedgewick (1990) has shown us, is "the closet." In the definition she advanced, the closet names a discursive as well as a literal space within which speech acts are performed:

> "Closetedness" itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence—not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it. (p. 3)

I wish to emphasize that according to performative definitions of sexuality, our repetitive acts of coming out locate us in a place that is neither quite "in" or "out" of the closet nor definitively "before" or "after" the formation of an identity. That is, identity is particular, imminent, always in a state of becoming. Much of queer theory is an attempt to read toward and from this space of identity and is consequently concerned with mapping out the relationship between the psychic and the social.

2. Substantial scholarship has developed in recent years on the relationship between space and identity. In part a result of critical projects in anthropology and geography, queer theorists have expanded the multidisciplinarity of this work by applying critical theory, psychoanalysis, and performance studies to the issue. For a range of critical projects in this area, see Chauncey (1994); Ingram, Bouthillette, and Retter (1997); Bleys (1995); Betsky (1997); Hayden (1995); Sanders (1996); Califia (1994); Dangerous Bedfellows (1996); and Pile (1996).

3. In my discussion of public sex, I operate with the belief that sex performed in "public" is intimately tied to what Sedgwick (1990) called the "epistemologies of the closet." Public sex may then be read as a performative gesture. We should not, however, imagine that public sex constitutes a homogeneous statement of "coming out." Events of public sex require careful interpretation, which attends to how sexual performances are differentially constituted by the discourse that surrounds them. I am suggesting that this constitutive discourse lies within the space itself.

4. The tension between these two positions, although never absent from debates about AIDS, has been renewed with a particular intensity in the past couple of years. In New York City, conflict has arisen between "pro-promiscuity" (Kramer, 1997) activists, such as Michael Warner, Kendall Thomas, and Douglas Crimp, and "neoconservative" (Warner, 1997) gay writers, including Larry Kramer, Andrew Sullivan, and Gabriel Rotello. Although conducted primarily as a conversation about AIDS, the central issue is, according to Warner (1997), "the legacies of the gay movement—its democratic conception of activism, its goal of political mobilization, its resistance to the regulation of sex and its aspiration to a queerer world" (p. 15). Public sex is the focal point of the disagreement. Kramer (1997), for example, in a withering opinion piece published in the *New York Times*, asked why public sex is framed as an issue of civil rights. In debunking this argument, he announced,

> Fortunately, more and more gay people are beginning to realize that it's time to redefine what it means to be gay. Allowing sex-centrism to remain the sole definition of homosexuality is now coming to be seen as the greatest act of self-destruction. There is a growing understanding that we created a culture that in effect murdered us, and that if we are to remain alive it's time to redefine homosexuality as something far greater than what we do with out genitals. But this redefinition will require nothing less than remaking our culture. (p. 37)

In retaliation to what Leo Bersani (1997, p. 34) called the "homophobic fantasy" that a culture, not a virus, is the cause of AIDS, Warner has argued that "whatever AIDS teaches us, it's not that having an urban sexual culture was a bad and unhealthy thing that we should discard now that we're out of our collective adolescence" (quoted in Scott, 1997, p. 89). He has noted elsewhere that "it is an absurd fantasy to expect gay men to live without a sexual culture when we have almost nothing else that brings us together" (quoted in Stolberg, 1997, p. 6). Rofes (1997) has more directly answered the accusation of a murderous sexual culture, stating that

> even a cursory look at the histories of our movement will show that sexual liberation has been inextricably bound together with gay liberation, the women's movement, and the emancipation of youth. Among the most effective ways of oppressing a people is through

> the colonization of their bodies, the stigmatization of their desires, and the repression of their erotic energies. We believe continuing work on sexual liberation is crucial to social justice efforts.

In an attempt to combat the rhetoric of the "neocons," Warner and others formed Sex Panic, an activist group intent on advocating sexual freedom. The group worked against the New York City government's rezoning regulations, which have almost completely eliminated adult bookstores in the city. It also demonstrated against the police harassment of gay men in public sex sites and criticized city health officials who advocated the extensive policing of sex clubs. Clear and detailed information on safer sex practices is included in all Sex Panic actions.

6. Although the piers were predominantly a site for gay male public sex, they were neither exclusively male nor exclusively for sex. For the purposes of my argument concerning the historical and communal characteristics of gay public sex, I shall confine myself to discussing sex between men.

In the years that I visited the piers, I saw them used by many men and women for a wide range of activities, from rollerblading to sunbathing. For many years, homeless men, women, transvestites, and transexuals lived on the piers until they were forcibly removed by the police. The place was also home to many of New York City's homeless youth.

For well over a decade the piers have been a popular place for gay and lesbian youth of color from the outer boroughs to gather. On Friday and Saturday nights during the summer, hundreds of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender adolescents and their straight friends collect on the piers, play music, and dance. Some of the youth also hustle. The johns are predominantly White men from the neighboring areas.

From my observations and many of the accounts I heard from men I met on the piers, it is clear that White, Latino, African American, and Asian men have always been part of the public sex culture of the place.

6. For decades, the future of the piers was unclear. Many proposals were made over the years to renovate the waterfront, but because of a lack of funds and political support they were not implemented. The local community board, one of the most active in the city, also thwarted much of this planning. With the financial boom of the 1990s, however, things changed, and the area has been beautified. All but one of the piers was demolished. The remaining pier is being renovated and incorporated into the recently completed park running from the Battery at the southern tip of Manhattan to 14th Street. The renovations have been made to provide recreation areas for all residents of the city and include bicycle and jogging paths, open lawns, and benches. The work includes an element of historic preservation—old-fashioned street lights, appropriate to the period in which many of the houses preserved in the Greenwich Historic District were built, have been installed along the pathways through the park.

7. The piers had a reputation for being dangerous. Over the years, men were seriously assaulted and some were murdered there. The structures were also unsound and I heard accounts of serious and in some cases fatal injuries sustained as a result of buildings collapsing or segments of the piers caving in and leaving holes through which people fell into the waters below. Over the years police violence added to the danger, either through the harassment of men on the piers or through the neglect of homophobic acts of violence.

Danger colors the erotic tales of the place. Charles Bergengren (quoted in Betsky, 1997) captured this in his description of the piers:

> The ultimate backroom for the heaviest sleaze action—a backroom for the entire city, in fact—were the piers that lined the Hudson River: full of gaping holes to the river below, dangling gantries, and girded catwalks, they were the very definition of dangerous and at night, *extremely* dark . . . . The action, when it happened, was extreme, as was the image. It was about stretching those very limits, reaching new highs, crossing new thresholds. Of intensity. Into the forbidden. Breaking more taboos. (p. 149)

8. As with most urban spaces, there are multiple histories invested in the piers. They reflect the rise and fall of New York City's commercial maritime power, they were the location for some of the earliest union organizing in the city, and they are tied with the international passenger shipping industry and the emergence of the 20th century's penchant for tourism. The piers I write of also lay across the street from the Jane Hotel, which secured a place in the folklore of the city when survivors from the *Titanic* were accommodated there. In addition, the sheds that stood on the piers were noted examples of industrial and commercial architecture, reflecting the prominence and wealth of the businesses they housed. For additional information on some of these other histories, see Bone (1997), Buttenweiser (1987), Kellerman (1989), and Zaleski (1986).

9. Photographing the piers was a common practice. A number of the men I met on the piers shared photographs with me that they had taken over the years. This practice adds weight to the argument that the piers are a significant site for the gay community. These images are also among the few records we have of what the predemolition piers looked like and how men used the space.

As interest in the history and importance of the piers grows, these personal collections of images are being circulated and collected. In 1993, hundreds of photographs by Leonard Fink, an amateur photographer who died of AIDS, were given to the New York City Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center archive. Fink's images (see Figure 1) document the heyday of cruising on the piers from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s (a number of the photographs were reproduced in the August 1997 issue of *Out* magazine ["On the Waterfront," 1997]). Frank Hallam, now in his 50s, has also documented this period and intends to donate his archive to the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center.

Richard Renaldi began an extensive documentation of the piers in 1993 at the age of 24 (see Figure 3). His work illustrates the contemporary culture of the piers, where gay men, queer youth, straight yuppies from the West Village, and tourists come together. This project is also significant for the fact that it is by an artist who neither knew the piers before the sheds were demolished nor was a member of the pre-AIDS New York gay community. A slide presentation of his and Frank Hallam's work at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center on August 26, 1997, illustrated the dramatic change in the place as well as the difference in vision and experience between the two photographers.

10. The sense of timelessness is strikingly similar across the literature of the piers, as is the emphasis on the quality of the light. This tone captures what I believe is a crucial quality of erotic memory: the confluence of material detail with fantasy construction. Consistently in this writing, the men are described as being ephemeral, ghostlike, or illusory. These qualities suggest that the men have a proximity to death. For example, David Wojnarowicz (1991b) compared the men to ancient figurines in his essay about the piers, "Loosing Form in Darkness":

> Seeing the pale flesh of the frescoes come to life: the smooth turn of hands over bodies, the taut lines of limbs and mouths, the intensity of the energy bringing others down the halls where guided by little or no sounds they pass silently over the charred floors. They appear out of nowhere and line the walls like figurines before firing squads or figures in a breadline in old times pressed into history. Stopping for a moment, I thought of the eternal sleep of statues, of marble eyes and lips. (pp. 22-23)

Writing more generally of cruising, Betsky (1997) conjured up the image of Orpheus when he suggested that the cruiser "sings his world, however plaintively, alive" (p. 145). In his description, the cruiser inhabits a "city of night" in which "the solid forms of everyday appearance do not so much disappear as they turn to ghosts" (p. 145). The transformation of solid forms common in both these descriptions and the rise of sound through the darkness is also found in the opening pages of Edmund White's (1978/1980) novel *Nocturnes for the King of Naples*, in which he cruises the piers late at night:

> A wind said incantations and hypnotized a match flame up out of someone's cupped hands. Now the flame went out and only the cigarette pulsed, each draw molding gold

> leaf to cheekbones. There are qualities of darkness, the darkness of gray silk stretched taut to form the sky, watered by city lights, the darkness of black quartz boiling to make a river, and the penciled figures of men in the distance . . . beneath everything else I smelled (or rather heard) the melancholy of an old, waterlogged industrial building. (pp. 1-2)

The most striking characteristic in White's description is the animation of the elemental and physical. Although the men are indistinct and fragmented, the wind is hypnotic and incantatory, and the building has a melancholic air. It is as if the wind and structure were more alive than the men. This theme of formlessness and dissolution is addressed in the closing sections of this article. For a discussion of the utopic promise in writings about public sex, see Muñoz (1996).

11. Bersani has offered strongly worded correctives to assumptions that gay male sex per se, no matter how "radical," leads to a radical politics. In 1987, he wrote,

> More precisely—and more to the point of an assumption that radical sex means or leads to radical politics—many gay men could, in the late '60s and early '70s, begin to feel comfortable about having "unusual" or radical ideas about what's OK with sex without modifying one bit their proud middle-class consciousness or even their racism. (p. 295)

This position is one of the many Bersani has taken in opposition to what he sees as redemptive readings of sexuality. He locates the radical heart of sexuality in its move toward ascesis, or "self-shattering," and the resistance of redemption impulses. See particularly his study *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (Bersani, 1986).

12. The Westway Project, proposed in 1974 by the federal government, involved extensive landfill, parkland, and commercial development of the West Side. Long delayed by budget constraints and the opposition of environmental and community groups, sections of the plan, most notably a park the length of the Manhattan's West Side, are now being completed.

13. The survivor stands to lose a great deal by relinquishing his attachment to the lost object. In the case of the piers and other significant places in the life of an individual, the extent of this loss is suggested by Wojnarowicz's (1991a) realization that "to give up one's environment was to also give up biography and all the encoded daily movements" (p. 108). Mourning involves a significant loss of meaning.

14. It is at this point that we return to the play between form and dissolution underlying this study of the relationship between sex and space. The trope of doubling, consuming, dissolving, and ultimately destroying form occurs in various guises across the field of AIDS, community activism, and identity building. Identity is figured as a search for form, and this search is mirrored in the construction of space.

Spatial metaphors abound in descriptions of psychic processes and are used to illustrate the shift between coherence and transformation. Jacques Lacan's (1949/1977) drama of the mirror stage codified the tension between an individual hallucination of coherence and experience of fragmentation. This is a drama that plays across the gap between the visual and tactile surface (i.e., between the external, visual image of the self and the internal, felt image). This doubled image is apparent in Delaney's (1988) experience on the piers. What he could not resolve visually, he attempted to realize by what he took in hand—or in this particular episode, in his mouth. This moment illustrates the role sex plays in repeating this search for form.

Jean Laplanche (1970/1976), in his definitive study of the search for psychic form, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, provided a crucial reading of the spatial dimensions of ego formation, adding the metaphor of structure to the field of the ego. Noting that the ego has to be "developed," Laplanche suggested that the process is expressed through

> the resemblance which is affirmed between the subject's own body and the body of the sexual object, treated as a whole and cajoled, contemplated and caressed; contemplation, care, and caresses are the process constituting and confirming the total form, the limit, the closed envelope of [the skin]. (p. 68).

It is from the introjection of these forms that the ego is constructed.

Mourning provides a critical insight into the form of this construction, as Judith Butler (1995) noted. Referring to what she termed "melancholic internalization," she noted that what Freud (1917/1959) called the "character of the ego" in his theory of mourning and melancholia "appears to be the sedimentation of those objects loved and lost, the archaeological remainder, as it were, of unresolved grief" (p. 22).

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